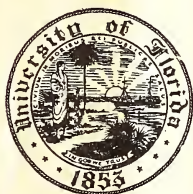


Steve Belcher


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THE
GRUDGE

By Bert and Dolores Hitchens

THE GRUDGE
THE MAN WHO FOLLOWED WOMEN
END OF THE LINE
ONE-WAY TICKET
F.O.B.: MURDER

By Dolores Hitchens

THE ABDUCTOR
FOOTSTEPS IN THE NIGHT
SLEEP WITH SLANDER
THE WATCHER
FOOLS' GOLD
SLEEP WITH STRANGERS
BEAT BACK THE TIDE
TERROR LURKS IN DARKNESS
NETS TO CATCH THE WIND
STAIRWAY TO AN EMPTY ROOM

A CRIME CLUB SELECTION

Tommy Collins had a corroding, insensate grudge—against his mother and sisters, who had turned him over to the police—against the railroad which had fired him from his job. And now, having killed three people in his explosive escape from State Prison Hospital, he was at large, wreaking vengeance in his characteristically deadly way.

It was already too late to save one member of the family, and Special Agent Farrel, of the Los Angeles Railroad Police, had to halt Tommy's rampage of death and destruction before it claimed another victim. . . . For Tommy was playing for keeps—with dynamite.

Scene: SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA



FAVORITE SLEUTH

THE GRUDGE

Bert and Dolores Hitchens



PUBLISHED FOR THE CRIME CLUB BY

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PASTIME
COLLECTION

*All of the characters in this book are fictitious,
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Chapter One

The Special M.O. Bulletin on Tommy Collins came in, with several others sent over from the Los Angeles Police Department for the information of the railroad police. It was a bright sunshiny morning in springtime. Some of the springtime smell and brightness even straggled down the air-well of the immense old building, as far as the railroad offices on the eighth floor, and some of it even seemed to affect Pete. Pete was the office man in the Special Agent's Office. He was tall, thin, going gray, with an expression usually bookish and withdrawn. Now he seemed touched with a brush of whimsy. He looked through the Special Bulletins and the wanted flyers from L.A.P.D., and the sullen and stupid and stubborn faces of the culprits thereon seemed unfitting for the morning and the springtime. Then he found Tommy Collins.

His first instinct was to say, "What's this kid doing here?" and then he did say it, out loud, repeating the thought, and a railroad dick named Reves looked up from a desk where he was occupied with paper work.

Pete read on about Tommy Collins.

The chief special agent, Ryerson, was out on business. There was just Pete and Reves in the office right now.

Pete knew that he had caught Reves' attention. Reves was easy to distract, though, when he had reports to make out. He hated paper work and usually tried to wheedle Pete into taking his reports by dictation, not Pete's real job. Pete continued, shaking his head, "There's something kind of quaint and old-fashioned about blowing people up with dynamite. I mean, considering what's cooking these days in the ways of explosives. Dynamite is . . . it's nineteenth

century. Out of date. Passé. Like wooden churns and buggy whips and kerosene lamps." He stood there as if musing. "Sure, like kerosene lamps. Just about like." He glanced over at Reves. "Oh, hell, you wouldn't remember."

"I grew up on a farm in the middle of North Dakota," Reves said, as if that must bind them in understanding.

"What, no electricity?" Pete asked in wonder.

"Not until I was fifteen." Reves was speaking now in a clipped, soft voice, a remembering voice with something tight and hard just beneath the surface. "My old man died then and Ma put it in. She bought a tractor, too. We put Sugar and Gladys out to pasture. They'd worked a long time." He frowned meditatively. "They were mules."

A minute went by and in the dazzle of sunlight, soft as silk out in the air-well a butterfly spiraled down, lost somehow here miles from where he ought to be, a displaced bit of color with no future in stony cement and black asphalt.

"Damn, there's a yellow butterfly, a big one," Pete said, as if gripped in a new phase of the springtime whimsy. "Imagine a poor little devil of a butterfly here in the middle of L.A."

"Who's blowing up people with dynamite?" Reves asked.

Pete looked back at the bulletin. "A guy named Collins. Now that's something. His mother named him after a drink. Thomas Collins. Alias, Tiger. How's that? Tiger Collins? Male, Caucasian. Twenty-six years old. Six feet, one inch. Build, slender. Black hair, brown eyes. Fingerprint classification . . ." Pete mumbled the classification to himself. "No marks or scars. Used to work for a railroad in . . . uh . . . Kansas. Has a special dislike for railroads. Hey, he ought to be on the teletype to us." Pete read further. "No. No, he's supposed to have skipped to Mexico."

"What's the rap?"

"Busted out of prison."

"How'd he get out?"

"How else? Dynamite. Loves the stuff."

Reves was watching the butterfly battle the updraft in the air-

well. Crazy bug trying to commit suicide, Reves told himself. The war against bug life on the farm had never inured him to the miracle of life even in an insect, nor blunted his appreciation of the total of creation. "Where was he?"

"A state prison in the Middle West. Got himself to the hospital. He blew up a nurse and two other patients in getting out. Wanted for murder now. Doesn't say what he did to get in, in the first place. But it seems he has a particular affinity for dynamite, so perhaps he's sent somebody else sky-high too. Look at him." Pete walked over and flipped the M.O. bulletin down on top of Reves' paper work.

Reves looked. "Hummh."

"Isn't it like you've seen him somewhere before?" Pete demanded. "You know, it's like those wholesome young types you see in the movies, TV. They all look alike somehow. Nice. Clean. But smiling. This guy isn't smiling."

"Maybe Collins doesn't look that good now," Reves offered. "He spent some time in the state pen, didn't he?"

"Three years, or about."

"Well."

Reves and Pete went on looking at the mug-shot of Tommy Collins, front and profile, a handsome image made three years ago and two thousand miles away, and nothing dimmed the feeling of spring out there in the dusty air-well, nothing blurred the sunlight nor shattered the drifting of the lone butterfly. Here was a lost life spread out on a flimsy sheet of paper, its crimes enumerated, its failure and its frenzy compressed to fine print, but nothing whatever warned Reves or Pete that this lost life had anything to do with them.

The alley in the quiet district on the west side of L.A. had twilight in it.

Nothing like dark, as yet. This was spring and days were growing longer. But the outlines were beginning to be blue and misty, a touch of haze in the air that spiderwebbed the dark height of eucalyptus and dimmed the clump of pepper trees. Garages lined the

alley and the long line of closed doors shone flat-white under the last light from the west. Shelly Collins stepped on the brake.

Her hand reached for the light switch. She never drove into the garage, even by full daylight, without first turning on the headlights. Nor without wondering why she did it. If he was waiting in there, seeing him first wouldn't help.

But there was nothing alive in sight except a white cat sitting under a sheet of bougainvillea bloom. He was licking his paws. He looked a little blue from the twilight, too, Shelly thought, a little ghostlike; and then he lifted his eyes and the headlights shone in them like fire.

She stopped the car and got out, lifted the garage door, caught a whiff from the interior, the always-smell that made her nose wrinkle, old unfinished wood timbering, and dead newspapers, and discarded furniture now riddled by mice. The landlord never cleaned it out, never discarded anything. There was room for her car, that was all. She stood by the door for a moment, listening. From behind the wall of stacked papers came a faint squeak. A mouse. Or the creak of shoe leather. She forced away the sudden feeling of fear. Wait, she told herself. Wait and see. She faced the shadows in the corner.

She was a slender woman with soft brown hair. Her face had been prettier. It was still young, the chin firmly rounded, the profile striking. But the look of it now was fine-drawn. The mouth seemed set in an expression of control. And the eyes waited, watching, shutting out everything but the moment here at hand.

There was another squeak from the hidden corner, a rustle of paper, scampering, and she relaxed. She turned back to the car.

She drove inside, clicked off the lights, killed the motor, took her purse, locked the car and went into the rear yard, where the trailing eucalyptus and pepper trees made a bower of greenery. The white cat got up and came along hopefully, but stopped halfway up the path as if sensing that the woman was paying no attention.

Her apartment was upstairs, the upper half of a duplex addition to her landlord's home. Stairs went up the outside wall, against the

stucco. It was a presentable-looking place, not at all luxurious. It was a bigger place than a woman needed living alone. Shelly Collins stopped in the yard to search out her door key. She looked up at the windows. The curtains hung motionless there. Of course they would, she told herself, hating this sudden hope that came without warning, this feeling that he would never find her.

He'll find me, all right.

On the upstairs landing she turned, to sweep the yard below and the neighbors' yards, with a searching look. There was nothing to be seen except the white cat in the gloom under the trees. He looked like a patch of snow. He mewed up at her hopefully, and a dry smile touched her lips. "Beggar," she said under her breath, "you're too fat now. Go catch some of the mice in that garage." She turned to the door and put in the key, then laid her ear against the panel. It seemed to her, as always, that some sixth sense flowed from her to search the room within.

It was very quiet on the other side of the door.

She turned the key with a sudden movement of her wrist and pushed the door inward. From the door she could see the length of the apartment, the living room, the alcove-kitchen and dinette, the hall to the bedroom, the open door of the bathroom beyond. And there was no movement of shadow, no scratch of sound, nothing.

She went in and shut the door behind her.

There was always this silly moment of feeling safe, too, once she was inside.

It was as if she'd run some kind of gantlet, getting from the downtown streets to this isolated edge of Hollywood.

She went through the living room, switching on lights as she passed, down the length of the hall, dropping her purse and sweater on the bed. Across the room was a big mirror over the dressing table. She looked at her own image for a moment, smoothing the full blue cotton skirt of the shirtwaist dress, touching her hair, smoothing it back over her ears.

"You look awful," she told herself, across the room.

The phone rang in the living room.

She jerked about, her hands dropping from her hair. The phone rang again before she started toward it.

"Hello?"

"Hello, Miss Collins? This is Mrs. Partside. I know I'm not supposed to call there unless it's important, but your mother has been so fretful, so determined to talk to you. And you didn't call at noon."

"No. I'm sorry. It wasn't that I forgot. I was very busy."

"Yes, I understand. Anyway . . . she just insists."

"I'll talk to her."

There was a moment of silence. The voice that came on was high and breathless. "Shelly?"

"Yes, Mother."

"I tell you, he's here! He's right here! Someone came and peeked in my window at four o'clock this morning. It was him!"

A sound like crying filled the wire.

"Mother, how could anyone peek in your window? You're on the second floor. Now, don't be afraid. You're so safe—"

"No, Shelly. I'm not safe. You're not safe. Neither is—"

"Mother."

"She's not safe, either!"

Get her back to the mundane, to the practical. Get her off the nightmare. "Mother, how could anyone look in your second-floor window? It's impossible. Can't you see that?"

"They've put a trellis under the windows and they're growing a rose vine on it. It's big. Strong. You think he's forgot to climb?"

There was a sudden businesslike edge to Shelly's voice. "Put Mrs. Partside on the line again."

"She's gone. Trying to be polite and let me talk in peace."

"Is it true about a trellis, Mother?"

"Yes, of course it's true."

"I can't believe it." Of course Mrs. Partside wouldn't put a trellis under her windows. It was unthinkable. She took in disturbed, senile, hallucinatory patients. She wouldn't give them something to climb down on.

"Come and see it."

"Yes, I'll come soon, Mother. And try to keep calm. Try to be patient. We'll be together again, soon."

"And will you get Steph out of that—"

"Mother."

"Will you?"

"Of course."

"They'll never let her go. You'll see. You'll be sorry."

"Now that's just foolishness."

"I know what they do in those places."

Shelly's face grew white and her hand whitened, gripping the phone. "You just think you know, Mother."

"I know," her mother repeated stubbornly. There was a pause. "There, now. I can hear the rosebush rubbing against the house under my window. It's plain as can be. Scratchy. And I can smell that new wood in the trellis. It's *there*. You say it isn't, can't be. But it is."

"I'll talk to Mrs. Partside about it."

As soon as her mother rang off, she dialed back and Mrs. Partside answered. "This is Shelly Collins again. Have you built a rose trellis under my mother's window?"

"Now, whatever gave her that idea?"

"I don't know, but she insists. She says it's there and that someone climbed up on it at four o'clock this morning and looked in at her."

Mrs. Partside said patiently, "She's being a little difficult these last few days. Doctor has her on some new medication. She may take a little while to adjust to it. If she doesn't settle down in a day or two, Doctor will try something else."

Shelly felt patience, control, slipping from her and tried to take a firm grip. That was the hateful thing about Mrs. Partside's. She was always having a doctor in to try something new on her patients. And most of them—Shelly hated herself for thinking it, but couldn't thrust the idea away—most of them would never be any different.

They needed quiet, and restraint, and good care. And time enough to die.

"I'll call again tomorrow and see how she's doing."

"Yes, Miss Collins, you just do that."

Mrs. Partside put the phone in its cradle, got up, pulled down the white nylon uniform over her plump hips, and went out through the front entry. At the side of the house she turned. Against the wall was a temporary scaffolding of galvanized pipe framing and redwood boards. The man from the termite inspection company was up there boring holes in the wall with an auger. He looked down at Mrs. Partside, not taking his hands off the tool.

"Have you found anything?" Mrs. Partside asked.

"Oh, you've got termites, all right," he assured her, as if giving a bit of good news.

She frowned. "Will you be there much longer?"

"No, not much longer."

"Some of my people here are nervous types," she said. "Did you remember . . . I think I said something about not looking in at them."

"I was pretty careful." He was thinking to himself, there was nothing inside to tempt anybody into peeping, to judge by the ones he'd seen being led around the grounds.

"Well, Mrs. Collins is bedridden," Mrs. Partside told him, "and she's very nervous." Now, I've done my duty, her tone implied.

"I'll remember." He went back to the holes made by the auger.

Chapter Two

Chuck Reves took the company car out of the garage at five o'clock the next morning. Ryerson wanted a fast report on what had happened at Las Pulgas last night.

Reves drove north through downtown Los Angeles, out through Glendale, on to San Fernando, the traffic already beginning to stir. He took the winding canyon highway on to Palmdale. Here was desert, a new world less than two hours from the smoggy canyons of downtown, boundless clean sky and open land, Joshua trees like scraggy sentinels, bare hills crouched on the far horizons.

He swung east at Palmdale and drove to Sagebloom, a dusty little town tucked into the edge of the desert hills. He stopped here for coffee and a cigarette. There was a depot, and he looked in at the freight office, thinking someone might be there, might have a line on the business at Las Pulgas, even if it was early. But no one was around.

From Sagebloom he took a winding road into the hills, more or less paralleling the spur line of track that led to Las Pulgas.

He had never been to Las Pulgas but he knew approximately what he would find there. It was a non-agency station which meant that no office personnel was stationed there. The conductors took care of the paper work on any shipments, and if for some reason something more was needed, an office man came out for the day from Sagebloom.

The road through the barren hills was bumpy, narrow, sloppily graded. It did nothing for the car's springs nor for Reves' temper. He was grouching to himself as he drove, and then suddenly wondered at his own sour readiness-to-anger, and remembered the letter last night. It had been waiting for him when he got home.

He'd taken it upstairs to the apartment, ripped the envelope, not really wanting to read what his mother had to say. The words were always there, black and white, easy to read: *"Why don't you come home, Chuck? You've been gone so long. I know you weren't happy while Dad was alive and running things. But he's been dead so many years. No reason you can't come back, and I need you."*

He squeezed his eyes shut on the desert glare, but like flame his father's image was etched against the view ahead, his father standing on the tail of the wagon with the hayfork, and the mules rearing, ready to bolt.

He opened his eyes, forced the long-ago scene from his mind.

The road skirted a fall of blue shale, then dipped through a dry ravine, crossed the spur track, climbed a slow rise on which hard pebbles sputtered under the tires. At the top of the rise he looked down into an open, flat valley, and there was Las Pulgas. There were three houses with sagging doors, windows broken, deserted. The station consisted of a small office attached to a loading platform, ore hoppers, a corral and stock chute showing long disuse. The traffic from Las Pulgas consisted now of a few hoppers of ore a couple of times a week. In the past there had been livestock, but a dwindling water supply had made the raising of feed too risky.

Chuck drove down into the clearing before the loading platform, braked the car and got out. Once away from the smell of the car's interior, he noted the clean freshness of the air. He listened for a moment to the silence. It was utterly still. Unbelievably still. The silence didn't crackle in his ears; it was dead. There wasn't even a cricket's chirp. For some reason the silence made him uneasy, caused him to stare around at the horizon, the tips of the crumpled hills, to see if someone was up there staring back; but there was nothing.

He went on around the end of the roofed loading platform to the rear of the office, and here was disaster. It hadn't been quiet here last night. An explosive force had torn a ragged entry into the rear wall. Framing and wallboard had rained in all directions, along with paper scraps and window glass. He went closer to examine the gutted interior. The inside was a scorched mess, but from what he could see it seemed the explosion must have blown inward. Against the far wall the remains of ledgers, the skeleton of the wooden counter with its linoleum top, an office chair and a broken table were flattened as if some giant foot had kicked them there.

No use trying to get in the door with all that against it. He found a foothold among the broken timbers and climbed in through the gap. Inside was a burned smell and the floor was unsteady.

He studied the mess and thought to himself, *not from below*. The explosive force seemed to have operated on the horizontal. There was no dirt as there should have been if the explosion had

occurred from ground level. The charge must have been planted against the outer wall at a little below the window.

He pulled some of the scorched ledgers free. They contained the usual records of freight shipments and so on, and all the dates were from way back.

Under the rim of the broken chair seat was a piece of cloth. Reves pulled it free. It was a torn and burned section of a man's pants, the lower leg. Khaki, he decided; work pants. Scorched shreds of some other material clung to it, seemed to dribble from it. Reves plucked the bits free. Cotton wadding—the kind of stuff you fluffed quilts with. He remembered its look and texture from long ago, from home. His mother had forever been patch-working bits of old clothes to make coverlets for the beds.

He took the piece of pants-leg closer to the light. There was no sign that the pants had been occupied when the blast had come. In fact, the information Ryerson had received from the Dispatcher's office, relayed from the Sheriff's office in Palmdale, had stressed that no one had been injured, or even as far as they could find out, present at the time of the explosion. So perhaps this scrap had just been a cleaning rag, something kept here to dust out when work needed to be done. No doubt the place would need a good dusting after the desert winds had blown.

Reves decided to take the half of pants-leg along. He poked around for another minute or so, then went to the gap in the wall and jumped down. Then he went around to the front of the office, which opened at the end of the loading platform. By some freak of chance, the front windows were not even blown out, just well cracked, protected by the mass of stuff piled against them inside. More of the strange cotton wadding seemed to have blown through the crack under the door. Reves tugged some of it loose from the dry splinters, took it with the other back to the car. He found a clean paper sack in the glove compartment, put in the scorched piece of pants-leg and the bits of cotton, folded the top of the sack closed and wrote a notation on the folded edge with a pen.

The spur track ended here at the ore hoppers, but a road led

farther into the hills. Reves drove, and cursed the bucket-sized holes too numerous to avoid. After about a mile he came out into a barren canyon and saw the mine.

It was a small-scale affair. Once there had been a big operation near here, gold or silver, as Reves recalled from what Ryerson had told him earlier. Now they were digging out a kind of clay used in cleansing powders. The whole setup, buildings, loading flumes, dump trucks parked in a row, hoists, water tanks, even the earth itself, was well-powdered with the yellow dust. Reves parked the car and got out. The sun was warming up. The air smelled utterly dry, completely clean.

There were three good-sized wooden buildings, one that might be an office and two that had porches around them and seemed more like living quarters. As if Reves had been expected, the door of the nearest building opened and a man came out. He was about fifty, thin and graying, dressed in faded blue shirt and cotton work pants. He squinted at Reves' approaching figure. "Hello. You from the Sheriff's office?"

"Railroad." As he walked, Reves reached for his wallet, flipped it open to his ID and the badge.

The man came down the wooden steps to meet him. He inspected the ID curiously, then offered his hand. "My name's Grosset. I'm foreman up here while we're working. All shut down right now, temporarily, but I stay to keep an eye on things. Last night I heard a big bang from down there."

"What time?"

"Past midnight, getting along to one. Funny, I knew right away it was at the siding. Placed it real quick. Guess that's because I've listened to the train down there, and so on."

"I understand you drove down there."

"Yes, I did. Didn't take me long, either. The inside of that little office was smoldering, little flames licking here and there. I just hopped right in and beat 'em out with a gunny sack I had in my car, use it under the wheels when I get stuck in the sand hereabouts. Worst scare I had—" He whistled at the memory, and

wincing. "By George, I thought somebody'd got blown up for sure. I couldn't see too good, just the little flames lighting things up, but before I got them all out it seemed there was this body there . . . Oh, brother!"

"A body?" Reves asked instantly.

"No. Just a . . . well, you couldn't even call it a dummy. It was an old shirt and a pair of pants, stuffed, and it was there with the rest of the scorched stuff. Plastered right in with the rest, against that wall—" Grosset stopped to shake his head. "I almost fell over, thinking it was a bum or somebody, gone in there to sleep, blew himself up somehow."

"What happened next?"

"I dragged the body out. Of course I knew the minute I touched it, it felt like a rag doll—but still, I wanted to get it out, I was right curious. And then when I got it out there and the wind touched it, it just burned up. You know how the dirt is . . . packed hard . . . I couldn't even throw sand on it. It burned up and the ashes just blew away."

"I found something." Reves went back to the car, brought the paper sack and opened it for Grosset's inspection.

"Could be a part of it," Grosset decided.

"What do you think?" Reves asked.

"Why it was there? Oh, I guess it was part of the joke."

"Joke?"

"Sure. Some kids did this. They'll do anything. You saw those houses there by the hoppers, didn't you? Ten, twelve years ago they were nice places, nice for the desert that is. The mining company had 'em there for some of their people. That's when the *real* mine was open, not this thing—" He motioned disgustedly behind him at the clay-digging operation. "Well, when the mine panned out, the folks moved, and right away . . . you'd of been surprised. The kids came from Sagebloom, and then from all over, Lancaster, Palmdale, Mojave, God knows where—and they had themselves a ball."

"Broke all the windows. I saw that."

"You haven't been *inside*," Grosset rasped. "What they did to the walls . . . what they wrote and painted, even on the ceilings—" He shook his head again, bitterly.

"Looks as if something could have been done about that."

"Something was. Well, not much. Once in a while a Sheriff's cruiser would run up there. Caught 'em, a couple of times. But by then there wasn't much more to wreck, unless you just plain old burnt 'em down."

"You think this explosion was more of this kid stuff?" Reves asked.

"Those kids are getting bigger. And meaner. They'll kill somebody someday."

"Any names you can give me?"

Grosset suddenly looked cautious. "Well, I know a couple of them in Sagebloom. Known their folks for years."

"I'd like to talk to them."

"Remember, I'm not accusing them of a thing," Grosset said carefully.

"Sure, I understand. I wouldn't know whom to accuse either," Reves said. "No idea. The best possibility is to find out where the explosive came from. It must have been stolen, perhaps not too far away."

"Lots of dynamite, these parts," Grosset told him. "Little mines here and there in the hills. Highway work. Going to be a big new cutoff in the direction of L.A., I hear. And even the railroad—isn't there something doing east of here?"

Reves nodded. His railroad was building a new route, planning an entirely new way to get freight from the east past Los Angeles to the north, avoiding the congestion of the Los Angeles yards.

"You think it was dynamite?"

Grosset looked at him indignantly. "I ought to know. I've been around it all my life. Of course it was dynamite. Just a plain little old stick of dynamite with a safety fuse. Child's play. And a dummy to scare the daylighters out of whoever came to see about the bang."

It was true, Reves thought, the dummy did make it all seem like a childish trick.

"You didn't see any sign of anyone still hanging around?"

"If I had, I'd of beat it pronto," Grosset assured him. "Those kids'll saw your head off with a switchblade knife without thinking twice about it."

"Do you want to give me a name or two?"

Grosset again seemed to grow cautious. "You won't mention I sent you?"

"I'm not a fool," Reves told him.

"Well, there's a family in Sagebloom named Deppler. Old man works for the general store there. That is, when he's sober. Mrs. Deppler cooks for the restaurant when he isn't. They've got two sons. Bingo and Div. Yeah, they've got real names but everybody's forgotten."

Reves felt such a surge of instant dislike that he promised himself this, that he'd ask Ryerson to send somebody else to talk to this pair. Bingo and Div. "Thanks. I won't go see them right away, I'll let a day or so go by. And I won't connect my visit with you in any way."

"Hope not," Grosset said uneasily, "and by the way, don't repeat what I said about old man Deppler. Drunk or sober, he's mean medicine."

Reves nodded. He half-turned to head for the car. "Thanks for putting out the fire. And thanks for calling in right away."

"Well, I never thought about calling the railroad, somehow."

"It's all right. We got it from the Sheriff's office."

"You think they sent anybody out? Didn't come here, if they did."

"Oh, yes, there was a cruiser sometime this morning. And they'll send an explosives man out today. He'll know what to look for."

"Well, I don't know what he can find down there."

"Maybe he'll see something we didn't."

Reves thanked Grosset again, went back to the car, stowed the paper sack in the glove compartment, gave Grosset a final wave of the hand, and took off. Grosset stood there in the sunny stillness,

looking down the road after him. Grosset might get kind of lonesome out here while the mine was shut down, Reves told himself. But the peace and quiet should be worth it.

He pulled up again at Las Pulgas and got out to look around. He noticed a scorched place on the earth, now, and decided it might be the spot where the dummy had burned up. The earth was packed as hard and smooth as stone. There were no footprints, nothing but the scattered scraps of the explosion.

Reves walked down the track, past the ore hoppers, to the row of houses. Windows gaped and porches sagged. He looked in through an empty doorway, what had once been a fairly spacious living room. Of course any building deteriorated out here in the desert, unless given good care, but the interior of this one had been smashed, wantonly destroyed. The sunlight lay peacefully on the broken floor, but the obscenities in red paint made Reves want to retch.

The railroad, of course, had always had—would always have, he corrected to himself—the problem of depredations. Any outfit as spread out, as open to the public, would have, and malicious damage went on day after day, year after year and a lot of the railroad cops' time went into the effort to keep it down. This, of course, had nothing to do with the railroad.

The wrecked office did.

He headed for the Sheriff's office in Palmdale.

Chapter Three

Reves got back to the office after three o'clock. He went in and hung up his hat and coat, and went to his desk, took report forms from the drawer, then looked hesitatingly at Pete. "How about it? Want to do me a favor? I'm bushed. Got up at a quarter past four,

A.M. that is. Drove out to Sagebloom. Coming back there was a wreck on the freeway and I spent forty minutes sitting in the heat and fumes."

Pete stopped hammering the typewriter long enough to say, "What's new?"

"I can tell it all to you in five minutes, and it'll be over."

"What happened to your education, that you can't write?" Pete wondered, not maliciously.

Reves gave him a weary grin. "I'll buy you a good cigar."

"You know I stopped smoking."

"I'll buy you a pack of salted peanuts."

"Oh, come on and give me the paper." Pete held out his hand.

He filled in the heading automatically, almost faster than Reves could read it. Then Reves began to feed in the facts.

Pete stopped typing. "Dynamite? Hey, doesn't that feel familiar? What was it? Oh, yeah, yesterday—"

"This dynamite was set off by a kid," Reves said, "and we know who the kid is. Or rather, one of two he's got to be. The Sheriff's men had a word on this pair. Deppler. Bingo and Div Deppler. I'm going to ask Ryerson to send Farrel out to talk to them."

"I've got a hunch—"

Reves was smiling, but he shook his head. "Pete, you'd never make a detective. You believe in miracles. And miracles just don't happen, at least, not here. We don't have any answers handed to us. What happens is plugging and digging, and a million tag-ends that never get tied up anyhow. Don't put your money on a long-shot."

"I was sold on it till you started talking," Pete complained.

When the report was done, Pete took it in and filed it in Ryerson's basket, on the desk in Ryerson's office. Ryerson had one corner of the huge room partitioned off, walled with glass above and with paneling below, a nice green carpet on the floor, a smell of cigars, and now, newly, an air-conditioner.

"When's he coming in?" Reves asked, as Pete emerged from the inner sanctum.

"I don't know. Not soon, I'd guess."

"I'm going home for a nap," Reves decided, and yawned.

Pete was rarely tempted to play around with anything the detectives brought in. He had enough to do, his own work, God knows, one man to handle the office work for the Special Agent of an entire division. Ought to have an assistant, as a matter of fact, a steno from the steno pool, maybe. There had been some talk about it. But the railroad dicks were funny about having a woman in the office. The way it was, the operation was strictly masculine. Rugged. Down-to-earth.

The reports didn't always make pretty reading, of course. Sometimes foul language had to be reported verbatim. Pete took it all without even a grunt of comment. And the consensus was, they didn't need a maiden aunt to *oh* and *ah*. So Pete struggled along, doing it alone, until perhaps another man could be found.

Pete had a special pipeline, a friend in the L.A.P.D., a Sergeant Holland who was an assistant to the Chief of the Detective Bureau, and he decided to call Holland now. First, though, he checked the flyer on Tommy Collins and refreshed his memory somewhat.

When Holland was on the line, Pete said, "We'd like to know what you've got over there on a Thomas Collins." He added the pertinent information from the flyer.

"Sure," said Holland, sounding preoccupied. "I'll call you back."

Pete hung up, feeling somehow smug. He looked at the air-well, where spring still shone and spangled, even though there wasn't a butterfly today. "Maybe," he murmured to himself. "Just maybe."

It was a little better than maybe. Holland called back in about twenty-five minutes. "Something came in since that flyer. The Sheriff in Collins' home town wants us to look up his family."

"Here?" said Pete, incredulous.

"Yes. Here. Isn't the whole damned country moving to California? So why should they be any different? Maybe they figured to leave the unpleasantness behind, coming west. Can't blame them for that."

"His family, you said? Collins was married?"

Suddenly Holland hesitated. "You haven't said yet, just why you're interested."

Keep it an even trade, his tone implied. But Pete wasn't going to betray a wild guess like the one Reves had laughed at. He said, "We want any information we can get on a boy who goes around blowing up railroads," and hoped Holland hadn't noticed the bumbling moment of hesitation.

"Say, that's right. That's what he did," Holland said. "He had everybody in the state as nervous as a bunch of cats. Nobody wanted to ship, or ride either—he made the railroad business as chancy as flying a kite in a cyclone."

Pete judged that Holland was looking over some new stuff on Collins. Pete licked his lips. The hunch, or intuition, or whatever it was, was like a beam of light glowing in his brain.

"You were going to say . . . about his family."

"He's got a mother and two sisters. They cleared out. Now the Sheriff wants us to look 'em up and put them in touch. Something to do with Collins busting out of prison."

"Thinks they'll know where he is," Pete put in.

"Could be. Well, we'll see what we can do about finding them. You want to know when we locate them?"

"Give me a call, will you?"

"Will do." In Holland's tone there was the comfortable assurance that the facilities of the L.A.P.D. would be more than equal to the task of finding Collins' mother and sisters.

Pete had one more trick up his sleeve. He called Sagebloom and asked the Station Agent there to find out if any local thefts of dynamite had been reported during the past few weeks, especially from the construction sites to the east, where the new roadbed was being made. "Stir 'em up a little out there," Pete requested. "Sometimes those construction outfits are pretty casual with their boom-boom stuff. I want to know if anybody even thought—even wondered for a minute or so—if they weren't short a few sticks."

"I'll try."

But later in the day this idea turned out negative, and Pete got busy with other work and temporarily forgot Thomas Collins entirely.

Shelly Collins went out into the hall on the fifth floor, walked down to the end opposite the door to Personnel, where there were three telephone booths. She stepped into the one on the end and drew the door shut. She put in a dime and dialed.

A voice like an echo of a whisper came on the line. "St. Catherine's Convent."

"This is Shelly Collins. May I speak to Stephanie, please?"

"Just a moment, please."

No sound at all now. She had no idea in which part of the convent the phone was located. In a hall, somewhere, perhaps. All that she had seen was the parlor, dim and clean, with a tile floor, six chairs, and religious pictures on the white stucco walls. The nuns wore white, with a black veil. They were Dominicans, she remembered. They took in girls from broken homes, girls in trouble, girls with police records—and sometimes somebody like Stephanie. The convent had walls like a maximum security prison, a barred gate, inner bastions she could only guess at. Where else would Stephanie be so safe?

Stephanie's voice was light, young and fresh. "Hello? Shelly? How is Mama?"

"She's . . . fine, Steph."

"No, really."

"I don't want to talk about Mother," Shelly said. "I want to know what you've been doing."

"We've been making an altar cloth," Stephanie answered, "and we didn't do it very well, and I think Sister went away and cried over us. Anyway, her eyes were red. And last night we helped in the kitchen and made hot rolls for dinner. And they didn't rise. And today a washing machine broke down and we tried to fix it."

"Stephanie—"

"And my shoe sole came loose. And I want a haircut. I want it kind of short. Look, I want it done in a beauty shop!"

"No."

"And I need some deodorant and a lipstick."

"You don't need a lipstick there."

"Yes, I do. It's a morale-builder. The Sisters don't mind. They know . . . for gosh sakes! . . . they know people wear lipstick *outside!*"

"Stephanie . . ."

"Please, Shelly! I'm going *mad!*"

"No, you're not," Shelly said firmly. "And you're not to think of going outside for any reason whatever."

"You'd think I'd *done* something, like the others," said Stephanie, beginning to sound sulky. "My gosh, at least they had their . . . uh . . ." The tone changed abruptly and Shelly got the idea one of the Sisters must be passing. There was a couple of moments of silence. ". . . *fling!*" her sister finished with a hiss.

"Let's don't argue," Shelly said. "There just isn't time. I'll send you a lipstick. You show it to Sister Superior before you start using it. I know you can send your shoes out for repair—"

"Let me go out in them!"

"No, Stephanie. Listen . . ."

"Oh, all right," Stephanie cried, her voice breaking. "Just don't start to preach! Only . . . only . . . I notice *you* aren't cooped up!"

It sounded as though the phone had been flung into its cradle.

Shelly Collins hung up the receiver and leaned against the side of the booth and looked with blank eyes at the wall. No words echoed in her mind, but a sense of defeat lay there, grim and sour. Her mother hated the Church, was unalterably opposed to anything about it, didn't want Stephanie in the protection of the convent, had tried to poison the minds of her daughters even though their own father had taken care to raise them in his own faith. Now Stephanie wanted out. How much of it had to do with the long erosion of her mother's bitter words? No telling. But Stephanie had

to stay put. Please, God, let her stay at St. Catherine's until this business about Tommy was over!

After a while of merry-go-round thinking and frustration, Shelly dropped a second dime in the phone and rang Mrs. Partside's. One of the attendants answered. Mrs. Partside had had to go to the store. "I'm Shelly Collins. May I speak to Mrs. Collins, please?"

"Oh, very well."

Her mother sounded tired and angry. "Shelly? Well, you finally had time to make a call. I've been lying here all alone, just wet with sweat—I made them shut those windows tight, and that trellis is still there, I know it is. There's something going on that she won't admit. It's worse than a prison here. It's a dungeon, that's what it is. An expensive, terrible, cruel, thoughtless, awful dungeon!" The words hammered through the phone into Shelly's consciousness. "I want you to call the police and report this place. And tell them who *you* are. And who I am. And they'll come and have a look, I'll bet."

"Mother, we agreed—we agreed a long time ago, there's no protection in going to the police. We found that out. We discussed it. You promised—"

"That Sheriff—" her mother shouted into the phone. "—of course, he couldn't protect a henhouse from a . . . a . . . oh, never mind. He's the world's prize nincompoop. But he's not the cops out here. He's not the L.A. police department! There're things on the radio, they're catching up with crooks all the time! I know, I listen. They aren't the stupid jerks *he* is!"

Shelly shut her eyes. She had the sensation of being in a disintegrating boat in the middle of the sea. What should have meant safety was breaking up and floating away, melting before her eyes. "You said you would do it my way, Mother. You promised."

"I've changed my mind."

"Please . . ."

"Do as I say, Shelly, or you'll be sorry!" The order was punctuated by the slam of the telephone.

She'd laid the plans so carefully, she'd been so cautious, so secretive. She was the only person on earth who knew where both her mother and sister were. And they were safe, if there was safety anywhere. And now both of them were demanding changes, and those changes would strip safety away.

She came out of the phone booth. At the elevators, a group bound for downstairs, for lunch, waited and chatted together. Shelly went toward them, tried to join the group without being noticed, without being spoken to. One of the women turned and noticed her, smiled a little. She worked in Personnel, Shelly knew. Shelly nodded a greeting.

One of the men was saying, "We're doing it on the barbecue. All the trimmings. Come on out Sunday. But bring your own beer."

A couple of other men laughed. The elevator door slid open; the elevator was already nearly full. About half of the waiting group crowded in, leaving Shelly to wait with the rest. She had a feeling of unreality, as if nothing were happening here, to her; what mattered were the rebellious ones, who threatened to escape, to expose themselves to the ferocious danger they seemed to have forgotten.

She would call Mrs. Partside later in the day and demand that a close watch be kept on her mother. No outgoing telephone calls—well, that was already arranged. But her mother was clever, and in the way Tommy was clever, choosing a method you'd never guess, a time you least expected—until it was too late. Her mother just might, somehow, find a way to get hold of the Los Angeles police.

I'm so tired of being the one who keeps it all in line, Shelly thought. I'm tired of being the one who can't quit watching, can't quit listening. I wish I could worry about a new lipstick. I wish I cared enough to get mad about an imaginary rose trellis. She brushed back her hair. She didn't want lunch, she thought. She wanted a place to lie down. A dark, quiet place. But there was nothing like that here. In the great, busy, humming building there was no dark quiet place to shut your eyes and forget.

She went down to the lobby. Crowds bustled to and fro. She

went into the cafe off the lobby and ordered a sandwich and a soft drink. The sandwich looked and tasted like a concoction made of paper. The drink was cold, tasteless with too much ice.

She was facing the windows, the view of the street. People churned past in a steady flood. Once in a while someone looked in. She found herself turning her head when this happened.

She tried to control the ever-present worry, to think calmly about what might be done, to plan.

Even if Tommy found her—and perhaps that wouldn't be too hard—there was still no way he could get at their mother. Or at Stephanie.

Suddenly she remembered how he had looked, there at the end, when they'd dragged him out of the house. Dripping with sweat and blood, his hair wild, his eyes streaming tears from the tear gas, sagging between the two grim deputies, the house behind him like a gutted cave, the smell of gunpowder everywhere. And then, what he had gasped out between sobs: "I'm not blaming you, Shell. You were at work. But it's Mom and Steph. They gave me away. They called the *cops*!"

The deputies had jerked him on, toward the Sheriff's cruiser, and he'd tried to look back at her over his shoulder. His voice had a sort of shuddering tone, an intense shock. "They turned me in. Mom and Steph. I won't forget it. It'll stay with me forever!"

She'd tried to answer, some word of caution or comfort, but her frozen lips hadn't moved.

Now in this hurried lunchroom, two thousand miles away, she put down the tasteless sandwich, touched her mouth with the napkin and stood up. She thought, I'll go buy Stephanie the lipstick and the deodorant. And then later I'll call Mrs. Partside.

But as she moved toward the door to the lobby, she seemed to see Tommy and the deputies ahead of her, Tommy writhing in their grip, trying to look back at her, until one of the deputies, impatient, gave him a chopping blow with the side of his hand against Tommy's unprotected neck.

Chapter Four

The town of Red Canyon lay about twenty miles northeast of Palmdale, on a long barren rise toward the fringes of the Calico Mountains. Red Canyon was a center for mining operations and for the shipping of ore and chemicals. The long, dry desert lakes produced an immense tonnage of potash and other chemicals. The dry buttes held ores whose history was ancient but whose names were new, ores whose uses were unknown a few years back. The town wasn't big, and neither were the freight yards, but the yards were an old operation, having been there since Red Canyon had been a division point, back in the 'twenties.

The yards hadn't been modernized, automated, like the yards in Los Angeles and other big places, but they were due soon for drastic changes. When the big new cutoff went into operation, enabling freight from the south and east to be switched out here for points like San Francisco and the rest of northern California, instead of tangling it up in the L.A. yards, Red Canyon would be completely re-built. Right now it was in a state of suspension, of preparation.

The night partrolman at Red Canyon yards was a man of sixty-four, about ready to retire, named Ave Secrist. He had lived in the desert all his life, intended to spend his retirement out here, maybe looking for gold. He was burned Indian-dark by the heat, had never been fat, was easygoing and pleasant in manner, never roused the hobos just to have something to do, and owned a boxer dog by the name of Pug. The boxer made the rounds with Ave every night.

Taking the dog along, it seemed to Ave, put him right up there in the most modern category, police-wise. You read all the time now, in the detective magazines, about the police here and there

starting to use dogs on their rounds. Warehouses, all sorts of places, were perfect for them. Or like in Central Park in New York, he'd read somewhere. The officer would walk by, seeing nothing but the dark, but the dog would smell the thug hidden under a shrub, and growl, or jump him.

Having Pug along made Ave feel that though he was almost retirement age, he was still right on his toes, even maybe more modern in his outlook than the young punks they were putting to work these days.

As night began to darken the heights of the Calicos, Ave came to the station office. Lights were on and the freight clerk was talking to the day patrolman, something about dynamite, and Ave stopped to listen.

"No, I haven't heard a thing," said the day man, Parker, shaking his head.

"The agent at Sagebloom wants us to ask around." The clerk glanced over at Ave from under the green eyeshade. "Somebody blew up the little office at Las Pulgas. They think it must have been kids, but they don't know where the dynamite came from. So keep an ear open."

Ave spoke a few words to Parker and went on to the patrolmen's room to leave his lunch. It was nice this time of day. Quiet, cooling off for the night. It would be pretty cool tonight, he judged. There would be stars out. No moon. At midnight he'd drink his Thermos of coffee and eat his sandwiches.

Ave had made his sandwiches himself, knew exactly what to expect, and this was sort of nice, too. Ave was a widower.

The boxer dog was outside, sitting beside the door. The day patrolman patted Pug on the head as he went by, and Pug reached for the hand with a long sloppy tongue, but Parker was too quick. He went off toward his car in the parking lot.

Ave came out of the office and Pug rose from his haunches.

Ave wore the usual patrolman's uniform, well-pressed dark brown pants with a khaki shirt, a gunbelt with a holster and Police Positive, loaded, fully checked, with handcuffs and a billy fastened to

the belt behind the gun. His cap had the railroad insignia above the visor. He wore a whistle on a leather thong around his neck, and carried a big flashlight. Now he shoved back the cap and stood looking at the yards, not seeing them as he would something new and different; the scene was too familiar for that. What his eye searched for was anything out of place, or unusual, and of course there was nothing like that. Hardly ever was.

The maze of tracks spread off into the growing dark, shining a little. There were a few lights here and there, some of them moving, where switchmen carried lanterns. A diesel engine panted in the distance, out of sight behind the cuts of freight cars, and there was the grunt and rumble of a train going by on the main line.

Some distance to the left was an old commissary building, built when Red Canyon was a division point, now mostly empty except for a few rooms used for storage. Ave usually started out by checking this building. A hobo needing shelter overnight usually tried to find it there, occasionally even breaking in.

Ave snapped his fingers at his dog and they started out.

Pug was a sober, dignified dog. It was as if he realized his place in the scheme of railroad protection, and took it seriously.

The commissary building had a ramp which faced the yards. At the other end of the building were the stairs leading up to the ramp. At this end was the loading dock, upon which, long ago, trucks had unloaded supplies for the diners.

Ave didn't head for the stairs at the other end. He stood on the ground and used his big flashlight. There were four doors leading into the building. Three had panes in them, and the light glowed in them emptily for an instant before Ave moved it on. The fourth door was that of a lavatory, still in use by the men of the yards. It was a little ajar.

"Well, Pug . . ." Ave switched off the light and started to move on, but noticed Pug wasn't following. He turned. At that moment Pug growled. "Here, now," Ave cautioned, thinking that someone must be using the lavatory and that Pug was mistakenly growling about it.

Pug looked up at Ave—he could see the boxer's eyes shining in the dim light—and whined deep in his throat.

On the very few times that Pug had actually found something . . . once a hobo hiding in a switchman's shack, and once a rattlesnake under some ties . . . he'd acted just like this, uneasy and apologetic. Pug wasn't really a police-type dog; he was too gentle for that. But now he seemed disturbed and wanted Ave to know it.

"Okay, boy, we'll have a look." As if indulging the whim of a child, Ave walked the length of the loading ramp and climbed the steps to the open platform. He shone the light in the pane in the upper part of the three doors, and saw nothing, and then shone it into the lavatory. And now Pug growled louder than ever, and even barked a little.

But the lavatory was empty.

Ave said, "Come on, boy. You've got a touch of jitters. Take it easy, now."

For the next hour, Ave checked boxcars, testing seals, looking for any sign of entry or damage, flashing his light into empties to make sure they weren't occupied. He stopped twice to talk to other men, one of them a switchman waiting to switch a cut of cars, the other a freight clerk who was out checking manifests tacked to the cars. Night had fully closed down now. The lights in the yards, bobbing lanterns, signals, the flashlight carried by the freight clerk, all made firefly glows against the dark.

Pug seemed uneasy.

Actually Pug wasn't supposed to be here. Ave knew that. Patrolmen weren't supposed to have a dog along. In the L.A. yards, Ave would have been told to leave Pug home. Pug could cause complications in a big place like that, not the least of which would be getting himself run over by a train. But here, it was that Red Canyon was small, almost isolated off here on the desert, and informally run in many ways.

And now Pug was sort of acting up. Even the switchman noticed it. "Your dog's jumpy, Ave. Been any stray cats around?"

"Nope. He got spooked over by the commissary. Can't seem to get over it."

The switchman put out a hand but Pug didn't wag himself and respond with his usual wet affection. He looked intently at the other man as if asking some attention he hadn't gotten from his master.

"There, now, old boy," the switchman said, rubbing the tough ears.

Pug gave a half-whine deep in his throat.

When Ave moved on, he decided to circle back by way of the commissary before going on to the office. Several times each night he checked at the office to see if anything had come in for him.

As they approached the commissary, a dark rectangular blot under the starshine, Pug ran ahead. He went to the end by the steps and Ave could hear him trotting back and forth. Ave switched on his light. He didn't carry it around lighted, of course; that would be a warning to somebody he might want to surprise. He caught Pug in the beam, trotting there with his head down, sniffing. Pug stopped, lifted his head and waited as if he had something to tell.

"Well, we'll look around again and make you happy," Ave said resignedly. As he climbed the steps to the loading ramp he made up his mind to leave the light on in the lavatory. The men switched it on and off at night as needed, but with Pug acting funny like this it just might be a good idea to leave it burning. The company wouldn't miss a few pennies for the juice, Ave thought.

Again he shone his light in the panes of the three doors. Some supplies were in there. The panes were dusty, but he could see boxes inside, fuses and stuff like that that kids loved to get hold of, but the boxes were stacked neatly against the walls, and there weren't many at that. He moved on now to the lavatory door and Pug was right beside him, pressing his leg, and he could feel how hard Pug's body was now, all tightened up inside his skin, and trembling a little.

"Now, boy. Now, boy," Ave said mechanically.

He didn't just shine the flashlight in, this time; he clicked on the overhead bulb. And there it was, a small white-painted room with a

toilet over behind a panel, a washbasin, a paper-towel holder on the wall, a soap dispenser in a bracket over the bowl, a cracked mirror, a receptacle for the used towels, really oversized for the small room since it had once been in a public restroom in a depot. It was painted white to match the rest of the lavatory. The lid came to a peak, with a hinged inset through which the used towels could be pushed.

And now, this towel receptacle seemed to be what Pug was interested in.

"I don't know what's got into you," Ave said, staring at Pug, who had hairs standing erect all along his big spine.

Ave went to the towel receptacle and pushed at the swinging section of lid with his left hand. It seemed stuck against something inside. Ave pushed harder. It yielded a little but not much. It was full. And yet, it didn't seem full of paper, somehow—whatever was inside was firmer than that.

Pug was whining.

"All right. All right—" Ave knew that the whole lid could be lifted up; that was the way the janitor emptied the thing. He examined the rim and found a kind of catch, released that, and found that he could tip the entire lid up on its hinges.

For a moment or more Ave stood in the grip of a sickening shock. He had found a body. He saw a shoulder, the shape of the back inside the shirt, an arm cramped up and distorted, bonelessly, across the place where the neck and head should be. In that moment Ave was conscious of his own heart's terrible pounding and of a sudden dryness in his mouth. The room seemed to swim.

Then he came out of it a little, and began to feel angry. It *wasn't* a body. He gripped the thing, and there was no feel of flesh. It was a shirt. He pulled it up, and pants followed. It was a shirt and pants, stuffed, filled out to make a near-human form.

Ave spent a minute in swearing, relieving his feelings.

Some damned practical joker. . . . In his disgust at himself, at his own momentary terror, Ave's thoughts skipped over the ones in the yards whom he knew to be addicted to horseplay.

He dragged the stuffed thing out and tossed it through the door. It landed with a soft bump, sprawling bonelessly out there in the light from the lavatory. Ave looked down into the towel receptacle. On the bottom were crushed towels and some of the cotton stuffing. Again Ave swore, and mentally ran through possible candidates for blame. "Some fool comic . . . he thinks," he said to Pug.

But now Pug was doing something different. He was over, head down, sniffing at the narrow space behind the open door.

Ave studied him uneasily. An idea flickered, one he didn't like—when he had come by here earlier, shining the flash in, someone could have stepped back of the door while he looked in.

The idea made Ave uncomfortable. It didn't just exactly fit into the image of horseplay, of a joke perpetrated by one of his co-workers. Anybody who had stuffed the figure into the towel receptacle should have been out *there*, in the dark, watching for the joke to come off.

"Who was it, boy?" He looked down at Pug, wishing that Pug could talk. Pug turned from the space behind the door, nose still down, and sniffed his way out upon the platform. He went over to the edge and stopped, as if the trail ended there at some jumping-off spot.

Ave stepped out, stood looking at the stuffed figure.

He kicked it, irritably.

Old clothes, somebody's work shirt and pants. The inside of somebody's discarded mattress.

"Come on, Pug. Let's pretend to ignore it."

As if it didn't matter now, as if he felt no more interest, he casually clicked off the light in the lavatory. He walked to the steps at the end of the platform, went down to the ground, listened for a moment for the echo of a snicker, a chuckle. The night was still except for the usual noises in the yards. Ave turned toward the lights of the office in the distance. Pug was beside him, seeming more relaxed now. Ave was aware, as he walked past, that the sprawled thing lay there in the dark. "Some damned fool and his big old joke," he told Pug.

If it *was* a joke, though, it was a damned silly one.

So much depended on, you might say, accident. How could the joker know, for instance, that Pug would be sure to lead him into the lavatory to find the thing? To be scared by it? How could the joker be sure he would examine the towel receptacle that closely?

But now, maybe. . . . Ave began to speculate, to try to figure out what might have happened. Say that he'd interrupted a better plan. Say that the thing wasn't supposed to be in the towel receptacle at all when he found it, but somewhere else. In an empty boxcar, for instance. A bait to make him go in, go after a supposed sleeping hobo. Or . . . or . . . Ave suddenly had a brilliantly grim idea—lying out beside the tracks, looking as if some bum had fallen there and had had his head cut off. Now that would make a *real* shocker! Some hasty alarms would go off before the truth came out. And someone could be laughing his head off out in the dark.

Well, that kind of a joke would be more in keeping.

He couldn't remember anything that gruesome being pulled off, and of course the railroad was awfully funny about any kind of horseplay around a train. But it could be.

When Ave went into the office, he gave the night man a real sharp look, thinking he might be in on the rib, but the office man seemed busy and preoccupied. When Ave asked if anything had come in for him, like from the Special Agent in L.A., for instance, the other man simply shook his head.

Ave went off on another round of the yards.

At midnight he ate his lunch and drank his Thermos of coffee in a small room off the main office, where there were benches, a water cooler and a soft-drink dispenser. Pug had a snack too, that Ave had fixed for him—canned dogfood mixed with carrots and cornmeal. Pug gulped the chunks whole and looked longingly at Ave's sandwiches.

At about one-thirty that morning, Ave passed the commissary again. It looked dark, deserted, and peaceful. At first he wasn't going to flash his light, just in case the rib was still on, but then he did,

swinging the beam back and forth and seeing, and puzzled by, the absence of the stuffed dummy. The thing was gone.

At almost the same moment Pug made a charge, up the steps, growling, lunging for the slight opening in the door of the lavatory.

It seemed to Ave then that the whole side of the commissary opened toward him in an eruption of shattering noise. He heard a thin, gasping yelp from Pug. Huge pieces of the building seemed to batter the air around him. There was a terrific sense of being lifted off his feet, like the movement of a wave, a tidal wave of rushing debris.

And then the wave carried him on into oblivion.

Chapter Five

Reves rolled over with a groan, coughed, blinked at the dark, sat up. The clock-dial glowing on the table by the bed indicated that it was after two, A.M., that is, Reves reminded himself. He got his legs free, leaned out and found the phone.

Ryerson. He'd known it, somehow.

"Chuck, there's been another explosion. Dispatcher's office just called. It's at Red Canyon this time. Blew out the side of the commissary. One of the night patrolmen was passing by . . . well, I guess there's just the one there . . . and he's hurt pretty bad. Can you get up there right away?"

Ryerson sounded wide awake, and for some reason Reves felt a slow fury building in himself. Ryerson was wide awake, cool and collected, though it was two A.M. and he must have been asleep like everybody else. Reves found himself wanting to slam the phone into the receiver, a feeling out of all proportion to the circumstances.

"Sure, I'll go right up there."

"Can you use your own car?" Ryerson said. "Time might be of the essence. And it will save some time, not coming downtown to check out a company car. Just keep track of your mileage, and so on."

"Will do."

"Try to find out if there's some connection between this thing and what happened last night at Las Pulgas. It's damned funny, two in a row like this, in the same neighborhood."

If you could call fifty miles, more or less, the same neighborhood. . . .

"I'll check that angle, sure," Reves said.

"And let me know."

Reves hung up and clicked on the light, and sat there rubbing his face. Ryerson had put it so politely, Reves thought sourly, almost as if offering a choice. *Can you get up there right away?* Suppose he'd said, no, I can't? Of course, he really didn't have to go. He could quit. Reves found himself staring at the phone. He could call back now, get Ryerson at home, quit over the telephone—and then take off for home, the way his mother wanted him to do. Go back to the old life on the farm.

And revive all the old memories.

Reves reached for the clock, punched down the alarm button so that the clock wouldn't ring later.

Suddenly he knew why Ryerson's voice had made him so mad. It had nothing to do with the job, nothing to do with driving back to the desert in the middle of the night. It had been the wide-awake tone, the alertness. That was exactly the way his dad had been at four-thirty in the morning. Year after year. When he'd be lying in the attic room, dead to the world, drowned and smothered in sleep and needing every minute of it after a day of chores, school, more chores, homework, chores, chores, that voice woke him. The brisk, cheerful, wide-awake voice out of the dark downstairs.

Why couldn't his dad have been a sleepy grouch at four-thirty A.M. like any normal man?

Why couldn't his dad's voice have echoed some of the other feelings pent up in that house? His mother's exhaustion and frustration, for instance, her everlasting battle with his father's stinginess? Or his own shattering fear that he might never be free, might never get away?

Why had his dad been such a—Reves thought of a whole string of unprintable words—*hypocrite*?

Reves got out of bed and went into the bathroom and started the shower. What was the matter with him? Why should things of years past seem important now? Why did all the touchy anger, the resentment, the envy, go back to his dad?

Reves got in under the stinging spray and the water needled away the last of the desire to sleep.

Well, to start with, Reves decided, his dad had been a real man. Tough. Self-sufficient. What his father might have been like in another environment was theoretical, but as a farmer fighting drought, grasshoppers, wheat rust or whatever it had been, government controls and bureaucracy, a willful clamoring wife and a lazy, travel-minded son, he had been a giant. He had stood astride the vast chunk of prairie land like a Colossus and he'd said: "This is my own land and I'll run it to suit myself, and my wife will control her desire to waste my substance, and my son will learn to share in the labor and conservation . . ."

Abruptly, Reves forced it from his mind, all of it.

He toweled, ran the electric shaver over his face briefly, dressed, went out into the kitchen and reheated yesterday's coffee.

Time, Ryerson had stressed.

He forced himself to sip the coffee slowly.

He began to check back through his trip to Las Pulgas, thinking it over. The piece of pants-leg and the cotton stuffing he had left at the Sheriff's laboratory in Palmdale. A repair crew would be at Las Pulgas by tomorrow, cleaning up the rubble. Probably they wouldn't rebuild the office; there wasn't enough use of it to justify the expense. They'd tear it down, what was left of it, and leave the loading ramp neatly trimmed off at the end.

And what about the two kids, the suspects, at Las Pulgas? Bingo and Div Deppler? Ryerson probably hadn't had a chance to send Farrel or some other detective up there to talk to them. Reves wondered if by any chance he could prove they'd been in Red Canyon tonight. Somehow, the Red Canyon explosion sounded much more serious than the damage to the office at Las Pulgas. Well, perhaps, because somebody had been hurt.

When he got to Red Canyon, the Sheriff's men were there, spotlights on the front of the commissary, something lying flattened and still under a tarp out on the dirt. Reves got out of the car. There was a smell of dust and broken wood in the air. The front of the building gaped at one end, where a door had been from the looks of the framing. Reves had been here a few times and he remembered now, the commissary was a relic of the days when Red Canyon had been a division point and had provisioned the diners.

He spoke to the Sheriff's deputies. The thing under the tarp was a dog, a pet of the patrolman who was now in the hospital. It would be taken to the lab in Palmdale shortly, examined for clues as to the explosion. The Sheriff's men already knew what had caused the commissary to blow up. Dynamite.

Reves felt no sense of surprise.

He went up on the loading platform, framed in light, and found it little damaged. The blast had taken place in a small room at the end of the platform—and suddenly Reves was struck by all the coincidences, the resemblances. At both Red Canyon and at Las Pulgas the buildings were semi-abandoned, only partially in use, or intermittently used. And in each case, the explosion had been arranged in a small part of the whole, in a little, confined area—at Las Pulgas in the small office and here—Reves was looking in at the wreckage, in what obviously had been a lavatory. The times practically coincided. And at both . . .

His train of thought blanked out. Before him on the planks of the platform, caught in the splinters and cracks, shining under the

strong light and combed into an outward pattern by the blast, lay dozens of shreds of cotton stuffing.

He squatted and pulled as much free as he could. He went back to the Sheriff's cruiser. "Have your lab man compare these bits with what I found at Las Pulgas," he requested.

They offered a manila envelope into which he put the shredded bits, adding his initials to the flap.

"What about a body?"

The Sheriff's uniformed deputy was standing by the car. They were waiting now for the explosives expert. This caper rated more direct attention than the affair at Las Pulgas. Red Canyon was actually a town, where Las Pulgas was not, and too, as Reves had thought before, somebody had been hurt. "The patrolman's in the hospital by now. The ambulance attendant said he had both legs broken, maybe internal injuries, maybe a fractured skull. He was breathing but he wasn't conscious."

"No, I mean . . . someone else."

"There wasn't anybody else."

"At Las Pulgas there'd been a dummy."

"We didn't see it." Obviously this man had been sent to Las Pulgas yesterday.

"It burned up, according to the man at the mine, Grosset."

"That so? When I was there I didn't see any trace of it."

"Well, I found a piece of it still inside the office," Reves said. "Your lab has it now. I think there must have been something like that dummy here tonight."

"Yeah? What for?"

"A gag, maybe. A joke. What else?"

The cop shook his head. "If it *was* there it got blown to kingdom come. We never saw a thing, unless those cotton bits . . ."

Reves nodded. He went around to the back of the commissary, but there was no damage here. The building sat up off the ground on timber pilings, but when he squatted and looked through, he could see clear space all the way to the bright lights on the opposite side.

Reves went to the office building down the track. The night clerk was in there, trying to work but obviously shook up and nervous. He gave Reves a hard stare as he came in. Reves didn't know him. He took out his leather wallet with the ID and the badge. "Reves. Special agent's office. What do you know about this blast tonight?"

The clerk put down some waybills he'd been sorting. "It must of been the gas, accumulating inside somewhere. You know, there used to be a big kitchen there, they prepared all the pies and cakes and baked stuff for the diners. Those gas pipes must not be shut off right. Or they've rusted, or something."

"The blast was set off by dynamite. What about the night patrolman? Did he mention anything to you, earlier? Did he seem suspicious about anything in the yards?"

"No. I can't say so." The clerk pushed up his green eyeshade and rubbed the worry-wrinkles on his brow. "In fact, he seemed about as usual. Uh . . . wait a minute." For a moment the clerk fiddled with a pencil on the desk, frowning. The room was very quiet. "No, it was earlier, I guess. He came in—but this was long before midnight, before he ate his lunch—"

"What was?"

"He came in to see if there was anything for him . . . you know . . . and I thought he gave me a real funny look. Kind of . . ." The clerk jerked the eyeshade down again. "I don't know. Maybe I just imagined it. But I remember, I thought at the time, he gave me a look as if he thought I'd been up to something. Yes, that was it. Exactly it. As if I'd been up to something!"

"What would give him that idea?"

"Damned if I know. Say . . . you said something about dynamite. I just remembered, there was a call from the agent at Sagebloom, something about asking around, any dynamite missing—"

"You knew the office at Las Pulgas had been blown up, didn't you?"

"Yeah . . . but like this?" The clerk licked his lips nervously.

"A lot like."

"That's not funny." The clerk came close to the counter, put a hand on it, tapped the pencil nervously. "What is it, then? Somebody with a crazy grudge against the railroad?"

"I don't know, yet." Reves looked around the office. He saw an open door past the end of the counter, benches in there, a soft-drink dispenser. "Is that where the patrolmen eat their lunches?"

"Yes." Plainly the clerk wanted, expected, more information on the mysterious dynamiter. He watched as Reves went back to the small room, looked in, came back.

"How long had he been taking the dog along?" Reves asked as he came back.

The clerk looked at him uncertainly. "Is it against the rules, having a dog?" When Reves shrugged, he said, "Well . . . must be six months, anyhow. The dog's over a year old now, and Ave started bringing him when he wasn't much more than a pup. Yeah, I'd say about six months. Pug flushed out a rattlesnake once, the thing was hiding under some ties, could have bitten some section hand. Pug was company for Ave, and then Ave used to talk about how the police, other places, were using dogs."

"Yes, that's true." Reves was silent then, thinking it over. It could well be that the dog had given the alarm, had sensed something wrong at the commissary and had led the way there. The experts could tell if the dog had been closer to the blast than his master. Probably he had.

Reves thanked the office man and went back outside. He took a flashlight from his car and made a survey of the area behind the commissary. He found nothing to encourage him. There was a big open space behind the commissary, used as a parking lot, not lighted at night, lots of dark shadows to give hiding to anyone lurking there. The ground was crisscrossed with tire tracks and footprints, an illegible pattern in the adobe dust.

Reves spent the next half-hour talking to men out in the yards. No one seemed to have noticed anything suspicious. But then, the commissary was near the edge of the yards, near the parking lot and

the streets that led toward the center of town. No one would have needed to cross the yards to get to it.

He found the man who had been the first to reach Ave Secrist, a relief switchman who had been on his way to the parking lot. He had reached the commissary almost immediately after the blast. He had found Secrist lying among scattered debris, the dog farther away, Secrist's flashlight still burning, fallen to the ground and shining toward the commissary.

"Just as if that's what he'd been looking at when the thing went off in his face," said the switchman.

The shattered doorway of the lavatory had been boiling with smoke, or dust, or a mixture of both, but he had not seen any flame.

Nor had there been any movement, any sign of a person being near, until the office man had come running from the opposite direction.

"What did the clerk say when he came up?"

"Oh, he let out a holler when he saw Ave. Of course, we knew right away, Ave was in bad shape. And the dog was dead already, must of died instantly. Then the office man cussed out the company because there must of been a gas leak under the commissary somewhere."

"No gas. Dynamite."

"Well, now . . ."

"Did you hear anything? Somebody running, maybe?"

"If I did, it's gone now. I wasn't listening, I guess."

"If a car had pulled out of the parking lot about then, do you think you would have heard it?"

The switchman scratched his ear. "I don't know. There's noise in the yards, too, all the time. Maybe if it had made a lot of noise . . . But again, I just don't recall any such thing. Do you think somebody blew Ave up and then beat it in a car?"

"Well, it's possible." To himself, Reves admitted that he didn't believe that Ave Secrist had been the real target here.

The dog had heard or seen something. Perhaps he'd heard the sputter of the fuse. He had run up close, had been killed.

Ave, farther away, had been injured by flying debris.

Reves phoned in a request to the Sheriff's office in Palmdale, asking that any cruiser in the vicinity of Sagebloom make a check at the Deppler house and see if the two sons were at home.

It wasn't too long until daylight now. He decided to wait at Red Canyon until dawn, looking it all over then on the chance of finding something he had missed.

Chapter Six

The daylight began to creep into the room, thin and cool and gray, and Mrs. Collins stirred on the high hospital bed. She took two or three deep, ragged breaths and opened her eyes. Her eyes were blank and unfocused for a moment. Then, with an effort, with an air of gathering herself to meet some threat, she forced herself up on an elbow and scrutinized the room. Finally her gaze turned to the windows.

The blinds were up halfway, showing the panes, which were also lifted a little to let in the fresh night air. Now there was the dewy smell of early morning.

For a long minute Mrs. Collins stayed propped there as if listening.

She shut her eyes, finally, and seemed about to sink back upon the pillows when there was a rubbing, or scraping noise, against the outer wall. Her eyes flew wide; her lips opened a little.

With a sudden, frightened air of resolution she pushed down the covers. She began to drag her arthritis-stiffened legs toward the edge of the bed. Every inch was agony. She bit her lips, squinted her eyes shut, and sweat came out on her face. She could feel her heart pounding now, and the doctor's words came back: high blood pressure . . . a heart attack at any time . . . a stroke . . . helpless.

"How can I be *more* helpless?" she demanded of the room.

She had to wait. Her distorted, clublike feet were almost at the edge now. They were like lead. She must stop for a minute and get her breath.

The crippling had begun long ago, when she had been a young woman, scarcely out of her forties. It had begun because of Tommy. The worry and the fright—the not-knowing what he might do next—had caused her system to turn acid. That wasn't what the doctors said, but it was her own conviction. Her body had turned all acid from nervous fear, and then she'd had diabetes, and heart trouble, and arthritis.

Well, no, she thought, it really hadn't been Tommy, not entirely. The two girls had done their share. They'd stayed with the Church, refusing to disobey their father, not listening to her. There had been hopes for Stephanie, even so, if she could have gotten her away from Shelly. But now, pretending to want Stephanie safe, Shelly had stuck her in some convent.

"Convent!" said Mrs. Collins, and spat over the side of the bed.

Places like that . . . Well, you knew; everybody knew . . .

An expression settled in Mrs. Collins' eyes, a knowing, almost lewd look. She seemed to be examining some inner vision.

Suddenly her glance fell again on her monstrous, crippled feet. Her lips tightened. She'd get out of this bed or die trying. She'd see what it was they'd put against the side of the house.

Whatever it was, they didn't want her to know.

There were footsteps in the hall, and she froze, then quickly whipped the covers into place. She heard the clank of glassware. A nurse, taking medication to somebody. Well, she didn't get medication this time of morning. The footsteps went on past the door and the sound died. Quickly Mrs. Collins forced herself erect and dropped her crippled legs over the edge. They hung there, high off the floor, and she felt like crying with rage.

Damned hospital beds . . .

She sat, at a loss, until a new idea occurred to her. Then she let herself down on the bed and rolled over, and thus face-down, be-

gan to lower herself toward the floor. Her feet reached the rubber tile with a bump, and she cried out, a muffled yelp that she smothered in the bedding.

By inching downward, by reaching to the utmost limits of her twisted hands, she was able to draw the bedside chair nearer. It had been put there for the doctor, was always carefully set aside—as if she'd ever need it!

Once seated in the chair, she was able to inch sidewise over the smooth tile toward the windows. Painful, but endurable. She felt a rush of triumph as she saw that her little excursion was going to end in success.

At last . . . at last, she had her hands on the window sill. And now, for the first time, she saw the view outside her window. She'd been carried in, helpless, had lain in the bed for all these weeks, staring at the walls, staring at the piece of sky outside; and now she could see the yard and the street, the driveway, the trees—she felt as if she were looking at the whole world, and as if it were all brand new!

For a moment she forgot what it was she wanted to find out. Then she remembered. She looked downward.

She gave a second cry . . . half of fright, half of triumphant recognition! Sure enough, there against the wall . . .

Her crippled hands gripped the sill, the nails digging into the painted wood, as she had not gripped anything in months.

It wasn't really a rose trellis, as she had thought! This was a . . . it was something bigger, stronger, horrider, frightfuler! It was meant to climb up on!

Tommy had built it!

She clung to the window sill, swaying on the chair, senses almost blanked out, something like a sliver of ice congealed in her brain. But after a while . . . how long she never knew . . . she came to herself a little, and found herself still at the window, facing the view of the driveway, the trees, the street. Her heart was hammering and her hands had shooting pains, and when she tried to take them

away from the wood they seemed riveted there, the bone and flesh welded to the sill.

"Mother of God . . ."

What on earth was she saying? Shock flicked through her. Something *he* used to say; she clamped her lips shut, and a tight, angry look settled on her face. At the same time, she seemed to throw off the effects of shock. Now she leaned forward and took a good, long look at the thing propped there against the wall. After a moment she smiled a little.

She was still smiling a little when the nurse came in to give her a basin to wash up for breakfast.

"Why . . . why, Mrs. Collins!" The nurse was oversized in her white nylon uniform and her cap—like all the nurses' caps here at Mrs. Partside's—was not that of any particular school of nursing, but rather just a generalized white shape that was becoming. "Oh, my goodness, you're out of bed! You've gotten up by yourself!"

"So I have," said Mrs. Collins, controlling the horrible twinges and twitches that arose from her twisted limbs. "Now you go and tell Mrs. Partside that I want to see her. Right away."

The nurse left, looking mystified, and presently Mrs. Partside came in. She looked freshly made-up, energetic, and grim. And seeing her, seeing her composure and the glint in her eye, Mrs. Collins knew all at once that she would not get the best of her.

She sprang to the attack. "You told me a lie, Mrs. Partside."

"What lie was that?" Mrs. Partside was at the bed, disapprovingly tugging at the disarray there. "That there was no rose bush outside your window? Was that the lie?"

"You said there was nothing to climb up on!"

"I said there was no rose trellis and no rose bush," Mrs. Partside said firmly, going to the window and putting a hand under Mrs. Collins' arm. "There aren't. There is a framework for the termite inspectors. This is an old, old building, Mrs. Collins, and the men must climb around over it to find the areas of infestation." She sounded as if the building had caught a virus. "If we could get everybody out for two or three days, we could let them put a shroud of

plastic over the whole house and fumigate it with a poison gas. Isn't that interesting? Did you know they could do that?"

She was guiding the crippled, sprawling body back to its resting place, though Mrs. Collins had made a halfhearted effort to cling to the chair.

"But we can't put people like you out on the sidewalk. Our ethics wouldn't let us. So they can't do the job in one fell swoop."

Fell swoop! In Mrs. Collins' tormented thoughts, a hawk came down on kitelike wings; but he was aimed for her.

"The termite people have to do it piecemeal. And hope they've got all of it."

Without any sign of effort, she hoisted Mrs. Collins into a sitting position at the side of the bed, then lifted the crippled legs and tucked them in neatly under the covers.

Mrs. Collins tried another tack. "I'm not getting any better here with you. Look at those feet."

"Doctor still has hopes," Mrs. Partside said, as if that finished the matter. She rearranged the room, putting the chair where it belonged, bringing the bedside table close and filling the basin with warm water. "Now wash up nicely and breakfast will be here before you know it."

When she had gone out, Mrs. Collins just lay supine for a while. She tried to search back through everything Mrs. Partside had said. Had Mrs. Partside indicated when the apparatus would be taken away? Today, maybe?

"I don't want it there another night," she whispered to herself, "The nights are the worst."

In her mind's eye she could see Tommy against the dark, his face framed at the window, looking in at her. She moaned under her breath and tried to make the image go away. But Tommy seemed to go on looking at her. He was bloody, wounded, and crying the way he had been there at the very last. She remembered, feeling sick over it, the terrible heart-squeezing shock she had felt when the two big Sheriff's deputies had dragged him out.

Somehow until that moment Tommy had been her little boy, a

child whose pranks were naughty but not dangerous, a boy whom people must excuse, must allow for, because he was so fair and pretty and winsome.

And then in an instant he had become someone she didn't even know, another person, a wild sweating thing like an animal.

She squeezed her eyes shut against sudden tears, clutched at the bedclothes, dragging them up to cover her quivering mouth. And finally the vision of Tommy did fade, or rather it changed for the better; the sweat and blood weren't there any more. Tommy's floating image seemed to look about fifteen. His hair was cut short—she hadn't liked that—and in his round face were the first fascinating changes of maturity.

In the convent room, Stephanie Collins rose in response to the soft bell's ringing. She wrapped the long white-cotton gown so that it protected her knees, knelt at the side of the single bed, began to say her prayers. The words came easily enough, but her mind wandered.

It was going to be a game, getting out and getting in again.

The Sisters thought they were pretty cute. Well, they were, in a lot of ways. It wasn't going to be easy to make the scene at the dime store, pick up a lipstick and the other stuff, and come back—and not be missed.

What would they do to her if she were caught?

Make Shelly come and get her?

What a blast! What a burn!

She hugged herself.

“ . . . Holy Mary, Mother of God . . . ”

For just a moment there was a pinprick of guilt. Of course there was a sin involved here, she supposed. She cast about, and decided that the sin would be one of disobedience. The nuns were in the position of her parents. She should accept what they said, and behave accordingly. But she wasn't going to. She finished her morning offering, and blessed herself, with an aggravated feeling of unworthiness.

When she had dressed, she went out into the corridor. Groups of girls, in twos and threes, were walking toward the chapel for Mass. At the end of the corridor stood Sister Helena, her hands folded out of sight inside the wide white sleeves of her habit, watching over all with a benign look. When she saw Stephanie, there was an added twinkle in her eye. Sister Helena knew all about the desperate need for a new lipstick.

For a moment Stephanie considered abandoning the project to get out and do her own shopping; but then Sister Helena stopped one of the other girls to speak to her about something, and Stephanie walked past, and the determination to be free, even for a little while, returned stronger than ever.

Shelly Collins ate an early, desultory breakfast. She had slept poorly. Her eyes burned and there was a soggy, furry taste in her mouth.

Nibbling at the scrambled egg, she found her thoughts scattering their way through the events of the last few months.

Tommy's escape hadn't rated any headlines in the Los Angeles papers; it was too far away, there were other things to occupy the local press. Her first news of it had come from little old Mr. Wolfe. Mr. Wolfe had been their neighbor back home, for years and years. When Tommy had been captured, taken away, sentenced to prison, she had decided that they had better move at once; and then Mr. Wolfe had made her promise to keep in touch.

"You never know, there might be something I can write you that would be important," he'd told her.

She remembered what she'd said then: "If I do write you, you must promise to tell no one—no one at all—where we've gone."

She hadn't written right away, after they'd reached L.A.; she had to find a nursing home for her mother, get Stephanie into school, find a job for herself. There was money that her father had left, and this would take care of her mother and pay a little of Stephanie's expenses. But having a job was imperative.

The job was the weak point in their safety. She knew that.

Tommy would know it. At home she'd been employed by the railroad, had learned the routine of freight-claims work. That routine was more or less the same everywhere, on any railroad in the country; it guaranteed a job almost anywhere she would go. It provided a sort of financial safety. But Tommy was no fool. He'd figure, too, that wherever she went she'd be apt to work for a railroad. Just as he had. . . .

Finally, she had written to Mr. Wolfe, giving the address of the apartment that she and Stephanie shared. And almost at once he had written back—somehow, he had a source of information about what went on in the state prison; perhaps through the Sheriff's office. He'd written that Tommy had been put into the hospital at the prison, some flareup of the foot that had been injured so long before. The injured foot that the railroad wouldn't pay for.

The foot that Tommy had hurt in a motorcycle accident, the foot that he'd limped on for twelve hours before he claimed it to have been hurt in the yards . . . too many people had known the truth.

It was then, when Mr. Wolfe had written that Tommy had got himself into the prison hospital, that Shelly began to look around for a place for Stephanie.

At that time, too, she had begun to be very careful about what she kept in the apartment in the way of letters and papers. She destroyed all receipts from Mrs. Partside; she burned the letters from the Sister Superior regarding Stephanie. And remembering what might happen to poor old Mr. Wolfe, she discarded everything but his mailing address, and that she kept, without any name attached, in her purse.

Thinking now about Mr. Wolfe, she decided that he really had kept his promise not to tell anyone where she was. Otherwise, since Tommy's escape, surely the police would have come and asked her a few questions.

Such as, did she know where Tommy was?

She faced a question in her own mind. If she *did* know, would she tell?

I'd make him promise, she thought. I'd make him swear that he'd

leave Mother and Stephanie alone. Surely he wouldn't really . . .

But he would. Yes, he would. With a feeling of sick despair, Shelly knew that Tommy's unforgiving hatred would never die, would never be turned aside. He would go on planning his revenge against the two he believed had been his betrayers.

Or perhaps now, even including Shelly herself.

Chapter Seven

Reves came into the office close to noon and caught Ryerson just before he meant to go to lunch. The two men sat down in Ryerson's office to talk over the dynamitings. Both men wore very serious expressions. Both of them knew exactly what the railroad was up against in a case like this.

In the outer office, Pete looked at the clock and pulled a cover over his typewriter.

John Farrel, one of the older detectives, was over in a corner at a desk, doing paper work. He was a big, heavily built man, quite gray, a stubble of gray beard quite obvious in spite of Ryerson's strictness about appearances. Probably if Pete had been closer he could have caught a whiff of Irish whisky, also entirely against the rules. Rule G, in this case. Farrell had pulled out a real hot chestnut for the railroad a couple of years past and from now until retirement might get away with a few rule-breakings. Provided he kept himself inconspicuous at it.

"I'm going to lunch, John," Pete told him. "Answer the phone till Richardson gets here, will you? He shouldn't be more than a few minutes."

"Sure," Farrel said, without looking up.

Richardson usually spelled Pete during lunchtime and any other times that Pete needed to be away for a while. He was on the verge

of retirement, was quite deaf, no longer went out on any strenuous jobs, night work, or anything out of town. He was a valuable man for checking items with L.A.P.D., Los Angeles County Sheriff's office, the FBI, postal inspectors, and myriad other law-enforcement agencies with which the railroad police constantly worked.

Pete went out and Farrel continued writing, and in the office where the air-conditioner hummed softly, Ryerson was lighting up one of his big cigars. He had offered one to Reves, but Reves didn't smoke and had turned it down.

Reves went on with his explanation. "The Sheriff's office finally sent a cruiser to check on the Deppler kids, just as I asked, but by the time they got there the kids could have made it home again from Red Canyon. They were home, all right. But the old man admitted that they'd been gone all evening and he didn't know when they'd come in because he'd been asleep. The mother was a clam."

Ryerson seemed thoughtful. "You think the Depplers are good suspects?"

Reves nodded. "The best. And if they didn't do the jobs themselves, I'll bet they know who did. Some local wise-guy. Somebody got hold of some dynamite and wants to play around. Not right at home. That would be too much of a giveaway. I'll bet, too, nothing ever goes boom right in Sagebloom."

"Why pick on the railroad?"

"Why not? Out there in the desert the railroad is a pretty prominent part of the scenery. Both Sagebloom and Red Canyon are railroad towns, in the sense that the railroad keeps them alive. Grudges get started easy in spots like that. And then, in both cases the railroad had an abandoned structure handy, to play with."

"You don't think there's more in it than that?" Ryerson asked, looking closely at Reves.

Reves hesitated. "I'm not saying it couldn't get worse. A lot worse. But so far I think it's just mischief."

"What about the dummies?" Ryerson seemed to be asking the question of himself as much as of Reves.

"Part of the joke. Trying to scare whoever comes running, make them think there's a body involved. Or"—Reves paused as if over some stumbling block—"a way-out idea, a kind of experiment. Seeing what would happen to anyone caught in the blast. But then, there isn't anything, really, to back this up."

Ryerson nodded. "About Ave Secrist . . . could anyone have had a grudge against him? Paid him off?"

"I didn't run into a hint of anything like that. My impression is, his being where he was, getting hurt, was an accident. Well, no, not exactly. I think the dog must have heard or smelled something—the burning fuse, maybe—and made a dash, and Ave went along."

Ryerson went on probing. "What about Red Canyon yards? Any trouble we hadn't heard about? Anybody sore, or fired? Any accidents?"

"Not a thing that I could dig up."

Ryerson swung around in his big swivel chair. On the wall of the office was a map of the division. The two men spent a silent minute looking at it. Red Canyon and Sagebloom, far to the north, were out on the fringes, almost isolated. L.A. and the harbor area were a knitting-yarn tangle of converging lines.

"I've got an idea," Reves said finally.

Ryerson shifted, turned around again to face him.

"I thought of it early this morning. I was talking to the office man, the day man at Red Canyon, when he came on. Up in that area, there are two or three other places just about like Las Pulgas. One of them is about twenty miles east of Las Pulgas. It's almost an identical situation. Ore hoppers, a small office and loading platform, never used any more. There's not even anyone near, as there was with Grosset at Las Pulgas." Reves got up and went to the big wall map. "There used to be a mining town, something like Calico or Rhyolite, out here. Painted Creek, they called it. A spur used to go to Painted Creek. When the town died, they tore up most of the track. But they left a short spur to another mine." His fingers traced the route east from Sagebloom.

"You think it might get hit?"

"It's in the general location and it fits the pattern, the places that have been hit so far. Of course, you could say, he's getting bolder. He moved from Las Pulgas to Red Canyon, and that's a big step in one way, because Red Canyon's a working freight yards, lots of men around. But if it's abandoned buildings he wants to play with, and railroad property at that, I think the Painted Creek spur would be his dish."

"He could be looking over a bridge or a trestle this minute," Ryerson said quietly.

"Yes, he could. Or they could."

Reves returned to his chair. Ryerson put the cigar carefully into his ashtray. "You want to stake out tonight?"

"Yes, that's what I think should be done."

"What about these other places? You said, two or three—"

"They're farther from the main line, harder to get to. And one of them may be just what's wanted. But I'm betting on Painted Creek."

"All right." Ryerson nodded. "What about the Deppler kids?"

"I think somebody should have an eye on them tonight. Is Farrel busy?"

Ryerson knew that Reves and Farrel had worked together on several cases and obviously got along well together. He looked out through the glass, into the outer office. "He's out there. Let's bring him in here and explain things."

For the next half-hour the three men talked over plans for the coming night, Reves' stakeout and Farrel's job in Sagebloom with the Depplers.

Unspoken, the thought remained with all three: tonight the dynamite could be left under a culvert, attached to the supports of a bridge. There could be a wreck, the ultimate disaster for a railroad.

For several days Stephanie had been paying close attention to the routine of the keys.

The front entry was hopeless. That's where the visitors came through on Sunday afternoons. There was an outer gate with a

heavy lock in the grille. Mother Superior kept the key to it, and in addition, Stephanie found out through the grapevine, there was some electronic gadget that sounded an alarm in Mother Superior's quarters, if anyone monkeyed around. Then, inside the gate there was a walk of paving stones between rose bushes, perhaps twenty feet in length, then an arched entry and the main door. The main door was *not* locked, ever. This was in line with the philosophy of the nuns, that they kept only willing penitents here.

No, the front door was never locked. And you could walk through it. But then you were dismissed. If you'd been in trouble and had been sent here by the probation officers, you went off to some awful jail or someplace. And according to the grapevine, though that front door never seemed to be watched at all, no girl had ever gotten more than two feet past it and down that flagstone path between the rose bushes, before a nun was there, plucking at her sleeve.

There was something very, very scary about that front door, to Stephanie. The fact that it was open all the time, like a temptation waiting, was scariest of all.

So Stephanie concentrated on the other doors, of which there were two.

The side door was small, inconspicuous, set into the thick adobe wall—the place *was* built of adobe, she'd found that out; burned adobe bricks, which was why the walls were so thick and why it always seemed so cool and quiet inside. The lock on the side door had two keys, and one was kept by Sister Monica, who had hawk's eyes and a sharp little nose sniffing for trouble, and one was kept by Sister Bernard who was heavy-walking and slow, nearsighted and terribly kind.

Sister Monica guarded her key like a hen with a single grain of corn. Sister Bernard was always misplacing her key, which didn't matter a lot because one of the other nuns always promptly picked it up.

The side door opened right out on the street. It was where the new girls were brought in, usually at night, or early in the morning,

and there was a corridor leading directly to the rooms where new girls were kept for a while.

The other door was in the kitchen.

It was the door for deliveries of all kinds, and a Sister was there on duty from seven in the morning until six at night; for not only were foodstuffs delivered, but also classroom and craft supplies, personal things for the girls, all kinds of sewing materials from which clothes were made, and even, once, two pianos.

Stephanie worked in the kitchen for two days and studied the routine there, and gave up hope for the kitchen door. No matter which nun was on duty there, she was fiercely wary about door, key and lock.

You'd think, Stephanie grumbled to herself, that they were keeping out dragons.

She begged off from kitchen duty and joined the squad which had care of the halls and passageways, and while she mopped, Stephanie planned what she would do. Her hopes all lay in Sister Bernard.

So far as she could find out, no one had ever tried to get out of that side door, nor the one in the kitchen, either. Why monkey around with them when that front door stood open all the time, and all you had to do was walk through it?

But, Stephanie told herself, this situation had occurred because no one had ever wanted to go out and then *get back in*, again.

The way to freedom seemed to lie in a quick sprint from the front door, to scaling the gate, to the street.

But what I want, she planned, is to get out and not be missed, and to come back and be counted at bedtime, to be snug in bed; and she could picture herself lying there, hiding a grin, while a Sister looked in from the hall, the light behind her, and said, "Good night, Stephanie. Sleep well."

"Good night, Sister."

I have a secret. . . .

Stephanie did a dance step on the wet floor, using the mop as a partner.

Lunch was over at twelve-fifteen. I'll be out by twelve-twenty. Tomorrow, even, maybe.

I'm going to stay out for two hours, she told the dancing mop.

No . . . three!

No . . . four!

I'll come back just before dinner, sly as a mouse.

I'll go to the dime store. Have you ever been to a dime store, you old mop, you?

I have two dollars and forty-five cents in a slit in my mattress, and Erma will lend me a dollar more.

I can see a show!

I can eat a taco and drink a Coke!

I'll ride a bus!

Downtown!

Sister Bernard passed in the distance, slightly bowed, smiling a little, looking once nearsightedly in Stephanie's direction.

Stephanie blew her a kiss.

Shelly Collins went up the walk to the steps to her apartment. It seemed very quiet, very peaceful. The landlord had been watering here in the rear yard, and the greenery smelled wet and clean.

She started to pass the mailbox at the rear of the stairs—there was scarcely ever anything in it—when a glimpse of white through a slit in the metal drew her eye. She lifted the metal flap and took out a letter.

Mrs. Partside. . . .

Why wouldn't the woman remember her request, that no receipts for payment ever be mailed to her here?

There was some slip-up there at Mrs. Partside's. Either the woman was forgetful, or, more likely, she left the mailing of receipts to some bookkeeper. And the bookkeeper had never heard of Shelly's instructions.

Shelly ripped open the envelope as she went up the stairs. Inside was the familiar slip of paper. *For payment received.* . . . Once inside the apartment, she went at once to the kitchen, burned the

receipt and the return-address corner of the envelope in the sink, flushed away the ashes with water, threw the rest of the envelope into the wastebasket.

Then she picked up her purse and went on into the bedroom, tossed the bag on the bed. And suddenly stood immobile, frozen.

The room seemed to darken, as though a great, invisible brush had quickly swept the walls, swept away the last of the springtime afternoon. It was suddenly cold, and Shelly trembled.

Someone had been sitting on the bed.

For a while, during which the seconds seemed to boom inside her head, a thudding that seemed to reach down through the bones of her body into her toes, Shelly simply stood and waited. At last, from a cottony mouth she said, "Tommy?"

Nothing answered, nothing moved. She went to the closet, looked in, moved the clothing.

She turned back to face the room.

I sat there, she told herself. I must have sat there after I'd straightened the bed this morning. I sat there and forgot.

It wasn't true. The words she told herself were a lie. The old training never failed. Before you left your room for the day, you looked around. If there was any disorder, you straightened it.

And anyway, she'd been taught, strictly taught, never to sit on the bed after it had been made. It spoiled the looks of the bed and eventually broke down the edge of the mattress.

As if yesterday, she saw her mother with a finger uplifted, eyes narrowed, the stern voice speaking: "Mattresses cost money, and sitting on them breaks down the springs on one side. So remember . . ."

But this morning, Shelly insisted to herself, I must have . . .

She went and stooped, rubbed the disarray, tugged at the covers. Now they were smooth, the spread showed not a ripple.

After I'd made the bed, I had to run back in here for something. I sat down. What for?

To change my hose because there was a run in one of them.

She tried, but no memory came back to reassure her. The morn-

ing, now that she tried to pin it into place, to frame it in time, took on a frightening vagueness. It became amorphous, foggy, fragmentary. She couldn't remember what she'd had for breakfast, or even eating breakfast. She couldn't remember leaving, locking up, going to the car, driving to downtown.

The job. What had she done today, on the job?

That too was gone.

She stood in the middle of the darkening bedroom and time floated there around her, time without sense, without recall, without boundary, though the moments of it continued to pound inside her skull.

There was no day, no week, no month, no year, that she could claim. There was foggy twilight, and a lost feeling, and a bed that though now straightened seemed to bear, still, the impression where someone had sat down.

Chapter Eight

It's growing dark. The room's getting full of shadow.

I can't just stand here listening, my head pounding with fright. Waiting for Tommy. Waiting for a step, a word, a breath.

Tommy isn't here.

She forced herself to move. It was painful, like unlocking each joint one at a time. It was like the wrench of rusty clockwork.

She went through the apartment, slowly, carefully, looking into each closet and nook. In the kitchen she paused beside the sink and looked at the trace of ash where the receipt from Mrs. Partside had burned. Then she took the remainder of the envelope out of the trash basket. What had been on the corner? *Partside's*—what? Rest Home? Hospital? Haven? Now that she must remember, she couldn't.

Had the address been on the corner of the envelope, too? Or had there been a post office box number?

She turned the envelope over to examine the sealed flap. Her nail picked it free. Someone had done a careless job of moistening the flap. There was just a tiny spot, smaller than her thumb nail, where the glue had held.

Or had it not been sealed at all? Had it simply been dropped into the mail unsealed, and had Tommy found it in her letter box and examined it thoroughly, and sealed it a little, just to fool her?

The possible variations on what might have happened in regard to the receipt from Mrs. Partside stretched into infinity, a diminishing vista of whirling, twisting white letters.

She rubbed away the frantic vision.

Now she discovered something new. She discovered that she had accepted as a fact, as solid uncontrovertible truth, the idea that Tommy had found her. Somewhere during that search of the apartment, or during her study of the envelope, the inevitable adjustment had taken place. Now she knew. Tommy had been here. He had sat down on her bed. Perhaps he had sat there for a little while to think, or because he was tired, or because he'd had a brief notion to wait for her, to surprise her.

It had been Tommy who had sat on the bed, who hadn't straightened it afterward, because all the rules about fixing your room neatly which applied to Shelly and Stephanie hadn't applied at all to Tommy. Tommy, being a boy, had been picked up after, coddled, indulged, excused.

How had he gotten in?

She went to the door and examined the lock. She couldn't see any signs of damage. The door did not fit too closely in its lintel, and she remembered that there were ways to slip things into the crack and disengage the catch.

Tommy had been here.

Every time she turned now, inwardly, to re-confront the fact, it took on more reality and made her heart beat harder.

He had found her through the job. That fact, too, was no longer open to argument.

The door of the Freight Claims office always stood open, and people passed constantly in the hall. Tommy had had only to walk past once to see her busy in there. Then he'd gotten her home address, through some ruse, from the personnel office.

Not from any other source.

Not, for instance, through the California Department of Motor Vehicles. Because Shelly had disregarded the law that says a driver must have a valid license. She was still driving with her old license, now expired, and issued by another state.

She opened the door and went out on the upper landing. She looked down into the yard, half-expecting to see someone in the shadows of the eucalyptus trees.

The yard looked damper, greener, darker. And empty. Not even the cat was there.

She went back into the apartment, switched on a lamp though it wasn't completely dark yet, sat down to think. She couldn't take for granted, now, that Tommy didn't know where their mother was. If the letter had been in the mailbox when he had been here, he knew.

Finally she picked up the phone.

"Mrs. Partside? This is Shelly Collins. Might I see you for a little while? In about"—she glanced at her watch—"forty minutes?"

"Yes, I'll be here." Mrs. Partside sounded tight-lipped, as if she were holding in some anger or impatience.

"Is my mother . . . all right?"

Mrs. Partside drew a deep breath, audible over the phone. "She's been very difficult today."

"In what way?"

"Well, she managed to get out of bed. And now she insists on sitting by the window."

"No!"

"Yes, she says she's been bored. And that there is someone she must watch for."

"Mrs. Partside, I absolutely forbid—"

"So did I absolutely forbid," said Mrs. Partside, angrier than ever. "And it made no difference whatsoever."

"Has anyone called there? Checked to make sure she was with you?"

"No one called at all," Mrs. Partside snapped, reminding Shelly she hadn't called, either, though on most days she telephoned at noon.

John Farrel went home about four, to eat and shave and perhaps get in a nap in preparation for the night's stakeout to come. Home for Farrel was Mrs. Bellows' place. Mrs. Bellows was a widow. Her late husband had been a railroad man, an engineer, and after his death she had turned the big old house into a boarding home. Most of her tenants were railroad men like Mr. Bellows. Farrel was the only railroad cop among them.

Farrel parked his car and went in through the kitchen, where Mrs. Bellows was making rolls for dinner. She gave him a sharp, anxious look which he answered with a stare of innocence. Mrs. Bellows knew that Farrel drank—he kept the bottles in his room where she couldn't miss them—and she was always expecting him to be canned. Whenever he came home like this at an odd hour, he knew that she thought he'd been tossed out on his ear.

"I'll need a lunch for tonight. A Thermos of coffee, if you can manage it." He knew she would manage it.

"Why, certainly, Mr. Farrel."

He went up the stairs to his room, Mrs. Bellows' anxiety and the iron fact of Rule G like a Siamese twin ghost at his heels. Farrel opened his door, went in, kicked the door shut behind him and shucked his belt, gun, coat, and hat in that order.

He threw his tie on the dresser where it flattened like a worn rag. He examined his shirt in the mirror. Dirty. Oh, well, why not blow himself to a fresh shirt just for the night?

Or was there a fresh shirt?

Mrs. Bellows made periodic raids on the mess in the bottom of

his closet where shoes and old newspapers kept the dirty clothes company. He sighed with relief, on opening a drawer, to find a nicely folded stack of clean shirts. In the same drawer, wrapped in a towel, was the bottle he wanted.

He reminded himself to give Mrs. Bellows something for her favorite charity, a leper hospital run by some nuns in Korea.

He poured two inches of whisky into a water glass, went to the bed, sat down, let himself slump. He felt gray, tired, and old. He felt like calling Ryerson up and telling him what he could do with his stakeout. He felt like telling Reves to go soak his head. Ever since he'd pulled off the Lobo Tunnel job, they put him on the impossibles. And this thing tonight was a doozy.

He was supposed to keep track of two juvenile delinquents in a town where any casual stranger would draw instant attention; and where—he made a private bet with himself—a railroad bull would have all the anonymity of the Angel Gabriel in Purgatory.

When he had finished the drink, he rinsed out the glass in the adjoining bathroom and left it innocently beside the toothbrushes.

He took off his shoes, threw the shirt into the bottom of the closet, stretched out on the bed and shut his eyes.

The house was quiet. Mrs. Bellows, in the kitchen below, was trying to be as quiet as possible because she knew he needed some rest.

Out in Sagebloom, the two Deppler delinquents would be planning the night's fun, of whatever variety.

Over in the yards, two blocks away, a diesel switcher was hooting at traffic.

Farrel rolled over and drifted into uneasy sleep.

Reves sat in the kitchen of the apartment and drank coffee.

His eyes stung from the hours of driving, the loss of sleep. There was a stiffening ache between his shoulder blades. His hand, lifting the cup, trembled a little and Reves frowned over it.

A gamble, tonight. A big fat gamble. Ryerson had made that plain. If the dynamiter picked out Painted Creek spur for his funny

business, on the same night Reves was staked out there, it would be a miracle. It would mean that Reves was psychic, he had a gift, he could foretell the future. He was wasting a rare talent being a railroad bull. He belonged in the fortunetelling business, or at the Pentagon, or in Moscow, or at Santa Anita racetrack.

You could try to line it up by logic, wring a pattern out of it and figure, sure, this is the kind of place he likes and Painted Creek fills the bill. It's small, it's not used any more, it's railroad property.

But then turn it around and look at it another way. He started out with something small and isolated, practically abandoned—Las Pulgas—and then right away, one night later, he'd graduated into a working freight yards with a night patrolman, men working the switch engines, and an office open. Next jump . . . where?

Back to something like Las Pulgas, only safer?

Reves thought, I've made a mistake. I ought to call Ryerson and explain it.

But the plans were set. Farrel was going to keep an eye on the Deppler kids. The Sheriff's men would be looking around Red Canyon for any sign of trouble. And suppose . . . just suppose . . . the old office on Painted Creek spur went up tonight with no one there?

I'll get some sack time, Reves told himself, and see how it looks when I get up.

Pete was putting the cover on his typewriter when the phone rang. He was late getting out. Ryerson was already gone; the night sergeant was in the inner office taking calls.

Pete thought, ring and be damned. But then on an impulse he picked up the phone, and found himself talking to Holland at L.A.P.D.

"Say, Pete, we just got a request on that Collins family."

"Who?"

"You know, your friend who loves the railroads."

"Oh. Oh, sure. Thomas Collins."

"It seems he has a sister named Shelly. Shelly Collins. And she

might be working for a railroad. Freight Claims. Seems she had a job like that in her home town. Check it out, will you?"

"Will do."

Pete went down on the elevator to Personnel. When he went in he found the lights out, the big office apparently empty. Then he heard some sort of noise from the rear and a girl came from behind some cabinets putting on a coat. She stopped at a desk, took a purse from a drawer.

Pete walked toward her.

"You're leaving late," he said by way of greeting, and thought that the glance she gave him was nervous and unsure. She was quite young. Maybe she wasn't exactly sure of Pete's intentions, here in the empty office. "I'm glad I caught somebody. Can you check an employee—well, maybe she's an employee—for me?"

The girl hesitated beside the desk. "I don't have keys to all of the files."

Pete must have looked disappointed, because she went on: "What's the name of this person?"

"Shelly Collins."

"Oh. Her?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you're the second person asking about her today."

Pete blinked at her through his lenses. "And . . . what's the answer?"

"What answer?"

They seemed to be asking senseless riddles of each other, but at the same time there was a sort of psychic tingling across Pete's scalp. "Is she or isn't she an employee of this railroad?"

"Sure she is!"

"What department?"

"Freight Claims."

"How long has she been working here?"

"That's what's locked up," the young girl explained. "And I don't remember, offhand, except that it isn't as long as a year."

"Who asked about her before I did?"

"Some credit bureau."

"Sometime today, you said?"

"Early this morning."

Pete was close to her, staring fixedly. Maybe she misinterpreted his attitude of intense interest. She moved all at once and put the desk between them. Pete saw the move and smiled to himself, tried to seem more relaxed.

"Remember the name of the credit bureau?"

"Anchor Credit Association," she said promptly, moistening her mouth.

"They give you a phone number?"

"Yes, and I did like we're supposed to, I didn't give him the information on the first call. I looked it up and called him back. You know, we have to be careful. We can't just hand out stuff about the employees to anybody."

Pete had been here a long time and knew all about the routine in Personnel. "Did you check the number by the one in the phone book?"

A momentary blankness shaded her eyes. "Why . . . no. I guess I didn't. But he answered the phone. It was the same man."

"Nice talker?"

She blushed. Suddenly Pete knew, the man on the phone had kidded her, confused her, flirted with her. And she hadn't checked the number with Information.

"I'll bet he wanted you to go to lunch."

She glanced down at the desk and tried to control a smile.

"He's pretty good," Pete went on, pretending admiration, "to be able to tell a good-looking chick over the phone. I mean, tell her from a homely one."

The kid was blushing like mad, now.

"Do you remember the credit man's phone number?"

Still blushing, eyes downcast, she shook her head. "No. Wait. Madison five . . . something."

"You didn't take him up on the lunch date?"

She giggled.

"Now, one more thing. What about Shelly Collins, her address, her phone number?"

Her eyes came up. "That's what *he* wanted. He said she was buying a new car. The credit company had to be sure she worked here, the way she had said, and to check the address."

"And what was the address?"

"Ribbonwood Drive. Isn't that a pretty name for a street? The number was . . . I'm not sure . . . eight-hundred something, I think. Eight-hundred something and a half. Like an apartment at the rear. And there wasn't any phone for me to give him."

Chapter Nine

Pete lost no time in checking the phone book in his own office. There was an Anchor Credit Association, all right. But it was out in San Fernando and specialized in financing furniture payments. The phone number did not resemble the one that the girl in Personnel remembered.

Shelly Collins wasn't listed in the book. Information had no number for her, either. Pete sat, thinking; he decided that if she had a phone it bore an unlisted number. If she was trying to hide from her brother, this was understandable.

Now was the time to call Holland back at L.A.P.D. and tell him about Miss Collins.

Instead, Pete found himself wishing to do a little more. Wanting to see the girl, perhaps. Somebody ought to tell her about the odd call from the Anchor Credit Association.

He wondered if he could find her place.

As it turned out, the place wasn't too hard to find; it was in the hilly fringes of Hollywood, tucked away in a rear yard with a lot of eucalyptus trees. Miss Collins wasn't at home, but Pete talked

to the landlord. The landlord thought Miss Collins might have gone to see her mother. The mother was in some rest home, somewhere in Los Angeles. No, he didn't know the address. Didn't think Miss Collins had mentioned it. She was a very quiet tenant. And what might Pete want with her, the landlord's gaze asked.

There was an awkward moment.

Pete had played anchor man in innumerable investigations, had been the spider in the middle of the web, tying up the strands that bound a criminal. He had sorted, filed, arranged, studied, organized all the bits and pieces, sometimes over a period of months; and as often as not, played the trump that summed up the result of all the footwork, the stakeouts, with a telephone call.

But this was Pete's first adventure out of the office, and he found himself suddenly at a loss.

Then he heard himself telling the landlord that he was from the Anchor Credit Association, on a confidential inquiry; and he heard the landlord answering, just as confidentially, that he wouldn't say a word to Miss Collins, of course.

Mrs. Partside met Shelly in the hall. The hall was dim, very respectable-looking, polished, subdued; it was exactly the kind of hall one should have where one kept elderly people, confused people, senile wanderers, the bedridden. It was a comforting kind of hall.

The effect was lost on Shelly. She still wore the shirtwaist dress she'd worn at work all day. She felt tired and sticky and afraid.

"I'd better talk to my mother right away."

"Please, Miss Collins, in here for a minute or so."

The office was brightly lit and more businesslike. It was a suitable place to pay bills, to discuss the ramifications of insurance and pension plans, to quibble over doctors' services. Mrs. Partside seated herself behind the desk and at once took on a look of female rationality.

She folded her hands on the desk before her. "We deal all the time with the hallucinations of senility. The imaginings of the very

old are common here. But your mother is not senile. She is a woman in full possession of her faculties."

"She's so terribly crippled, Mrs. Partside. Isn't that excuse enough—"

Mrs. Partside's firm gray head shook from side to side. "No, it is not. What we're dealing with, in your mother's case, is plain stubborn defiance. Obstinacy. And we can't go on putting up with it."

Shelly felt herself trembling, felt some brink of disaster opening under her feet, the world falling away. "Please listen for a moment. There's something I've never explained, something you should know. I have a brother. He got into serious trouble. He was arrested. He's a . . . a murderer, now. He killed someone getting out of prison."

The look of firmness, of control over the situation, was slipping from Mrs. Partside's face.

"My brother blamed my mother . . . our mother . . . for his arrest. He believed she turned him in. If he can, he'll kill her. She knows this. She seems obstinate, just plain mean, to you. But inside she's afraid, terribly, *terribly* afraid! As I am."

Shelly was leaning forward, closer to Mrs. Partside, and she could see the perspiration that dampened the older woman's temples under the graying curls. The chair shook with Shelly's trembling.

"If he catches sight of her at that window—"

"This is . . . Miss Collins, this is unbelievable."

"No. Believe it, Mrs. Partside. It's the truth."

She saw the struggle to disbelieve, to ignore, to sweep away the outrageous facts. And inwardly, Shelly fought to keep at bay her own fear, tiredness, despair. "Please let me talk to Mother now."

Mrs. Partside got out of her chair. She seemed dazed.

"I'm sorry if I frightened you."

Mrs. Partside stared past her. "Go on up, then."

Shelly's mother greeted her with an angry spate of accusation. She was sitting erect in bed, in spite of the obvious pain. She looked

at least seventy. Shelly crossed the room and drew the blinds on the windows.

"Leave those things alone! I've got to *listen!*"

"Mother . . ."

It went on for a half-hour, and Shelly got nowhere. Her mother warned her, as soon as she was left alone for the night she was going back to the window. The only safety lay in keeping watch. And meanwhile, why wouldn't they take away the scaffolding? What was the motive behind leaving it there?

Staring at her mother in the soft lamplight, Shelly was aware of defeat. Her mother's face was squeezed into a witch-mask of hate and cunning. White hair hung down over her eyes. Hands like claws gripped the covers.

Afterward, going back down the stairs, Shelly couldn't even remember what she had said.

Mrs. Partside was waiting in the lower hall. She had a collection of papers in her hands; her expression was grim. "Of course we can't assume responsibility in a case like this, Miss Collins. If you had told the truth at the beginning, I would never have admitted her."

"There was nothing to tell in the beginning," Shelly said, her tone defeated, beaten. "She was simply a crippled woman who needed more care than I could give. Now she has to be guarded. It isn't her fault. It isn't mine."

Mrs. Partside made a gesture of exaggerated patience with her free hand. "Let's forget about blame. Here is a statement, the current bill. Up until the end of the week. By then you'll have to find another place for her."

Shelly forced some stiffening, some hint of pride, into her manner. "I intended to find another place. Somewhere where they'll keep her away from windows."

"Speaking of windows"—Mrs. Partside's eyes gleamed—"if she won't stay in bed tonight, we'll have to use restraint."

"Restraint?"

"A camisole."

Shelly nodded. She understood. They were going to put her mother into a straitjacket. For a moment longer she remained standing at the foot of the stairs, looking into Mrs. Partside's face. There was no softening, no relenting, there; Mrs. Partside went on firmly holding out the bill and the notice to remove her mother.

Shelly took the papers. They felt cold and crisp in her damp hand. She put them into her purse and went on out into the dark.

Reves turned off the main highway from Sagebloom. It was getting dark, there were stars overhead in the clear desert sky, and he'd turned on his car lights ten minutes ago.

The road reminded him of the one to Las Pulgas. The thin asphalt paving had chipped and broken long ago, parts of it had washed away in the winter rains, the road had then been patched with gravel and now even the gravel was disappearing. Rain on the desert, Reves knew, had none of the softness, the relief, of rain where there was vegetation; it ran off the bare stone and adobe to form floods, tearing away roads, paving, culverts, railroad tracks, bridges, anything man-made, in torrential frenzies. This road showed all the effects of rain and bad weather, and he had to drive carefully to avoid the holes.

Within a short while he had climbed through some stubby hills and was all alone, out of sight of the highway. He had rolled down the window to take in the air of the desert night. There was no sound at all except that made by the tires.

The road crossed and recrossed the railroad. The track showed signs of being kept in fairly decent repair, from what Reves could see. Apparently though the mines here were no longer operated, there was some expectation for the future.

Suddenly in the dark ahead his lights picked up the reflection of a windowpane, and then he saw the buildings by the track. Again he was reminded of Las Pulgas.

There was the unloading ramp, where supplies brought in by truck could be put off. There were the ore hoppers, tall and ghostly

against the night. And there was an office. Its window was what had caught the light in the distance.

Reves stopped the car, took a big flashlight from the glove compartment, switched it on, then turned off the car lights and got out. The silence was intense. For a moment he stood there listening.

He turned the big light up the steps to the ramp. The place was more rundown than Las Pulgas, he decided. It hadn't been painted for a long time. The planks underfoot were splintered, dried out by the desert heat. As he walked toward the door to the small office at the end, the platform echoed hollowly under his steps.

He turned the light on the door. The lock seemed all right; he put a hand on the knob, turned it. The door opened.

This was all wrong.

The door should be locked.

He stepped to one side, waited. There was no sound from inside. After a minute, Reves shone the light in. No furniture here, nothing. But no . . . wait. Reves felt a sudden chilling of his skin. There *was* something over in the corner.

Clothes. A form under them.

Reves kept the light on it, but the thing didn't move.

In sudden suspicion he stepped back, flicked the light all over the surrounding area, the ore hoppers, the length of track vanishing into darkness. But so far as he could see, he was alone.

He turned the light back into the office and went on in.

The pile of stuff in the corner spread itself under his kick. There were clothes, pants and shirts; they looked clean but unironed, like the results of a hasty raid on somebody's clothesline. They'd been folded in no particular order on top of a large cotton sack.

As Reves stared at the sack in the light of the flash, a slow and somewhat wry smile twisted his lips. He kicked it, experimentally. It wasn't heavy, though it was fairly full. Reves laid the light on the floor and knelt, and pulled open the drawstring. Inside was what he had expected, cotton rags shredded to waste, mixed with felted mats like old mattress padding.

Reves ran his hands all through the contents, but there was nothing else in the sack. Under the sack, on the bare floor, were a couple of army blankets, quite dirty, and a folded overcoat, worn ragged and smelling faintly of mothballs.

"This is where they make the dummies," Reves said to himself, and thinking of the Deppler kids; a little puzzled, too, because this was so far out of the way for them; there should have been places closer to Sagebloom that they could have used.

Reves now examined the rest of the room, even testing for loose boards, but there was no sign of any dynamite, fuses, or caps.

As nearly as he could, he piled the clothes back the way they had been. Then he went to the door and examined the lock. The damage showed here. The lock had been punched in from the outside, splintering the inner panel. Then it had been replaced so that superficially it seemed all right.

Reves went out into the night, clicked off the flash, stood on the platform in the dark to think. He decided that before he did anything else he had better get his car out of sight.

He got into the car and started the motor, clicked on the lights, drove forward slowly to investigate the end of the road here. Beyond the towering hoppers it disintegrated into a rough track, not impassable. Weeds scraped the under-chassis of the car, whipped at the wheels. Gravel crunched. But then the track turned, two broken ruts that ran in close to a granite ledge. Reves stopped the car and got out. He was sure that the car wouldn't be seen here unless someone walked out on purpose to find it.

He cut the motor and doused the lights, clicked on the flash and walked back to the hoppers.

Again, then, he clicked off the light and listened. In the desert silence it should be easy to hear any approaching car from a long way; but he heard nothing except a faint whisper of wind among the timbers of the hoppers.

He switched on the flashlight and walked around, and at once found more evidence of recent use.

A cardboard carton, a big one, had been turned on its side and sheltered under a covering of tar paper. Inside were two more army blankets, dirty and old like the ones in the office. There were two small aluminum pots, new-looking, of the sort commonly sold in dime stores. A box of matches, cans of corned beef and tomato soup and Boston baked beans and meatballs with spaghetti. There was a box of crackers, a jar of instant coffee.

Reves shone the light about, and found where a small fire had been made. Someone had been keeping house after a fashion. Well, kids like the Depplers would get a kick out of that, he thought. It would make them feel independent. Probably the canned stuff had come from home.

He found where a bed had been made, branches cut from the sagebrush and covered with a patched bit of tarpaulin.

Well, something more was necessary, unless water was carried here. Finally he found it, a wooden trough that led down from a crack in the barren rock, the outlet of a spring. Water dripped from the end of the little trough and someone had set an empty tin can, a clean one, under the drip. There was an inch or so of water there inside.

Someone had to know this place, he thought.

Somebody had to know what could be found here, privacy and shelter and water. Not much water, but enough.

Somewhere in the back of his mind, Reves realized, had been another idea, or rather a kind of doubt about the Depplers or somebody like them, all conjured up out of something Pete had said in the office.

But now Reves was sure. This was someone local, someone who'd lived here, who had explored the country.

He searched further, but found no trace of explosives.

They're being pretty cagey, he decided. Too cute to leave the real evidence lying out in the open. After all, it's no great offense to have busted the lock on an abandoned office and stored a bunch of rags there. Nor to have camped out beside a deserted railroad spur. If he could just find the dynamite . . .

But there was no dynamite.

Reves settled down to wait.

If they needed to make another dummy, for whatever purpose, a joke or an experiment, they'd come here to do it.

He sat on the steps of the loading ramp and waited for the far-off sound of a car.

Chapter Ten

Farrel pulled into Sagebloom about a half-hour past sundown. The place looked deserted, a tired and weather-beaten little desert town. The railroad depot and a few shanties made up one side of the business block. Facing the depot across the paved highway to Palm-dale were a garage, a general store, a bar and grill, a barbershop, an off-sale liquor store and a mining tool company.

Farrel pulled into the curb in front of the bar, cut the motor, got out and walked inside. Since he'd been in here last, some months ago, the old bartender had been replaced by someone new, a crewcut pugilistic type with hairy hands and freckles.

Farrel ordered a double shot. The bartender poured it while sizing him up. "You with the railroad?"

"What makes you think that?"

"Oh, I don't know."

There was a fan in the ceiling. The place smelled of beer and soapy water and boiled weiners. In the back were booths. Farrel and the bartender were alone.

"You well acquainted in town?" Farrel wondered.

"Ha, ha, ha," said the bartender. "Who's there to get acquainted with? You walk up one street and down the other and you've met everybody."

"Somebody's been planting trees here and there," Farrel said. "It used to be so bare. Dead vines climbing a rickety porch, that's all there was."

"Old lady Chapman put out the trees. She's appointed herself a kind of Chamber of Commerce for Sagebloom. She's trying to get a school here, she says it's too far for the little kids, going all the way to Palmdale and back."

"Who's Mrs. Chapman?"

"Moved out here from L.A. for her asthma. Had to get out of the smog. Owns apartment houses in Palm Springs. She says Sagebloom is going to boom. Only cheap land left out here, she says."

Farrel nodded. "You acquainted with a family named Deppler?"

"Them? Sure. Mrs. Deppler cooks here part of the time."

"You know their kids?"

The bartender's pale blue eyes narrowed under reddish brows. He made a sour mouth. "Bingo? Div? You looking for them for something?"

"Just wondered if you knew them."

"Sure I know them, they're around all the time."

"They go to school?"

"When they feel like it."

"Where's their home?"

The bartender explained how to find the Deppler house. Then, with a curious glance at Farrel, a touch of knowingness about it, he went back to washing glassware in the sink under the bar.

Farrel paid for the drink and walked out into the deepening twilight. He went down the block to the general store, where Deppler was supposed to work, and looked in. There was an elderly woman in there measuring gingham off a bolt of cloth for a younger woman who carried a baby.

Farrel got back in the car and drove around. He didn't drive directly to the house he wanted. Sagebloom was scattered over the desert hills, perhaps two dozen houses in all. One place appeared to have been remodeled and painted, and there were young trees and shrubs around it in profusion, making a brave show. He decided

that this must be Mrs. Chapman's place. When the searing summer killed her young greenery, how would she take it? Would she stick it out? Would she work and study, finding the things that could endure the desert? Or would she give up and go back, leaving Sagebloom to its bloomless waste?

Good luck to you, ma'am, Farrel said silently, as he drove past. And good luck to your trees and your bushes. Maybe if you give them enough water, they'll make it.

On a sort of knob facing the unpaved road was the Deppler place. It had been painted yellow at some long ago time. Now it was adobe-colored. A porch filled the front of the place. In the yard, tinkering with what Farrel judged to be about a ten-year-old Buick, were two teen-agers. They were man-sized but shaggy, overgrown; they made Farrel think of half-grown pups. Both wore faded jeans and white T-shirts, sneakers, blue and white caps cut in a pie-shaped pattern and with a black plastic bill; Farrel thought the caps looked like the kind of thing passed out to kids at service stations. The two were dressed so much alike they seemed to be wearing a uniform.

They spotted Farrel and lifted themselves away from the open hood of the Buick as soon as he turned into the road. Probably, Farrel thought, they'd had an eye on him all the time. It was nearly dark now, but the moving dark blot of his car would have been visible from the knoll.

The white T-shirts looked bright against the gloom. Farrel reached for the light switch. The headlights picked out the old car, the two kids waiting; and then as if in answer to his own lights, a light went on inside the house.

He drove by, looking out at them deliberately. And they as deliberately stared back. Their faces seemed hard, young, impassive, maybe with a hint of humor under the surface. Hell, Farrel told himself, they've stared down cops before.

How had Reves known, without seeing them?

Has a nose for j.d.'s Farrel told himself; smells 'em at a distance. The snotty look of defiance didn't bother Farrel in the least but he

sensed that it would have angered Reves out of all proportion. Reves couldn't take sass off teen-agers for some reason.

Farrel drove down to the end of the street. There was a broken-sided gully here, obviously used as a trash deposit; in the gleam of the headlights Farrel caught broken bottles and tin cans along the lip of the gully. He turned the car slowly, letting the Depplers take it in. They were still standing by the old car. Behind them the open door of the house let out a shaft of light.

He drove back, again giving them the long look. He couldn't read their faces, since the bright light was now behind them. When he was almost out of earshot, some remark was passed and then there were hoots of laughter. Farrel smiled a little. That's the way I was, too, when I was a kid, he thought. I wouldn't have let any damned cop stare me down and think he'd scared me.

Farrel drove back to the business block and parked and waited a while. The young woman with the baby came out of the general store and got into a battered pickup truck and drove away. The elderly woman clerk came to the door of the store and looked at the street. Then she shut the door and pulled down a blind inside. On the blind was lettered SORRY, WE'RE CLOSED. She went around inside turning off lights. Farrel watched her through the store windows. She left two lights on, pretty dim ones, and must have gone to some kind of living quarters in the back. She didn't come out and no car drove away.

After about fifteen minutes a Mexican kid materialized out of the dark, carrying a can with a spout. He went to the service station down the block, apparently for kerosene. Farrel thought, that's right, they've got electricity out here but wouldn't have gas piped in. You either cook with electricity or use kerosene or wood. And wood would be expensive. The Mexican kid came away, carrying the can as if it were heavy.

Farrel went into the bar again.

"Hello, there," the bartender greeted him.

"Hi. What's for dinner?"

"We got lots of stuff," the bartender told him. "Frozen, of course. You can have steak, chicken, sea food—you name it, I'll fry it." He put a knife, fork, and spoon in front of Farrel, along with a paper napkin, and waited. "Or, of course, there's hot dogs. They're ready now."

"Fry me some shrimp. About a dozen," Farrel decided.

"You want a drink while you're waiting?"

"Yeah."

While he was drinking the drink and watching the bartender at the electric grill, a woman came in. She was tall and black-haired. Farrel thought she looked Indian. She walked without noise. She was wearing a blue print housedress and a brown sweater.

The bartender looked over his shoulder and said, "Oh, good evening, Mrs. Deppler."

She nodded at the bartender and took a long studying look at Farrel. "I can work tomorrow if you need me."

"Why, sure, Mrs. Deppler. We'll put away this frozen stuff and give them a roast-beef dinner."

"I'll be in around two o'clock, then."

"Sure, you do that."

She'd been good-looking when she was young, Farrel thought. Taller than most; held her head up, her shoulders back. She had on some kind of perfume that didn't blend too well with the beer, soapsuds and boiled weiners, not to mention, now, the frying shrimp. The housedress looked starchily-clean though the sweater sleeves were raveled. She turned and went out as silently as she had arrived.

"Roast beef tomorrow," Farrel said, thinking he might be here.

"Oh, hell no. She just came in to get a good look at you," the bartender said grouchily. "Her old man ain't on a tear, she won't work. She doesn't work until they get almost hungry."

"Why should she want a look at me?"

"You went by their place, didn't you?"

"The kids were in the yard working on an old Buick," Farrel said. "I saw them but I didn't see her."

"She saw you. She's the sharp one up there. Old man Deppler . . . he's goofy. The kids're wild. I don't know why she stays with the three of them. You know what she used to do?"

"What?"

"She was an artist. A real honest-to-God painter. Painted pictures. Her Indian folks had some money, sent her to art school."

"How'd she get hooked up with Deppler?"

"That was before my time."

"You're new around here, aren't you?" Farrel asked, remembering that there had been another bartender here, that he hadn't seen this one before.

"I came back," the bartender said over his shoulder. "I used to live here five, six years ago. Worked in them mines back near Las Pulgas."

When Farrel had eaten the shrimp and had had another drink, he went out into the desert night. There was a breeze from the west, smelling of old and long-ago-eroded hills, dusty distances, and sage. Down at the corner, under the overhead glow beside the service station, was the old Buick, facing him, and in it were the Deppler kids. They had the dome light on so that Farrel couldn't miss them.

As Farrel walked to the company car, the kid behind the wheel started his own motor and gunned it.

About this time, Farrel thought, Reves would be walking over there to punch them one. I'm glad I'm on this end of the thing. I guess Reves planned it this way. Farrel got into his car and started the motor and waited while the old Buick, dome light out now and headlights gleaming, crept past him and out into the eastbound lane of the highway.

He had no trouble at all following the Deppler kids to the Las Pulgas station. He'd never been here before. A painted sign beside the turn-off told him where he was headed.

The old Buick slid down the grade, the wrecked office and the loading ramp in the headlight beam, and Farrel put his foot on the

brake and waited, back in the shadows. They knew he was here, of course.

Somebody had already been working here; there had been a beginning of the tidying-up. The broken boards had been cleared from around the small office and put into a heap, and all debris had been removed from the track.

Farrel noted that the Depplers kept a respectful distance from the railroad property. The Buick was parked some distance from the office, keeping the building in the headlights' glow, and the two kids got out and prowled around, shadows against the light, but warily. They didn't cross the spur tracks, didn't get close to the building.

Finally they walked away into the dark and a little while later Farrel saw a match flare. He wondered what was over there; he could see the shape of roofs, like a row of houses.

The kids were putting on an act, he knew. They were keeping him here; but now he was tired of playing the game their way. Deliberately he swung his own car, backed it, headed for the highway. When he had driven a mile or so he found a fork, a pair of ruts that cut off to the west between scattered brush. He drove down the rutted track a short distance and parked and cut his lights.

Presently the Buick showed up, coming fast, the headlights bouncing. It went past, then out of sight, leaving a stir of dust in the air. Farrel waited five minutes, then started his own car and drove back to Las Pulgas. Using a flashlight he went all over the scene of the explosion, the deserted houses; he investigated the framing and surroundings of the giant hoppers. There was nothing out of the way that he could see. No trace of explosives hidden here, no secret cache.

He drove back to Sagebloom. The old Buick was there in the street before the service station, exactly as before. The kids were in the front seat. The dome light wasn't on, was the one difference. Farrel parked facing them, got out, went over and leaned at the open window.

"Your name Deppler?"

The question seemed to astonish them, for some reason. Farrel decided that they had figured he knew them, knew all about them, knew how dangerous and how delinquent and how thoroughly incorrigible they were. They had expected belligerence, toughness; but Farrel's tone was mild and quiet.

"Of course our name's Deppler," said the one driving, with almost an air of grievance. "So what? What's it to you?"

"Oh, I don't know," Farrel said, leaning on the window. "Maybe, nothing. It depends, I guess."

"On what?"

"What you know about the big bang over at Las Pulgas."

"We don't know anything," said the one on the other side, looking smug; Farrel was getting around to what they wanted, now. "Nothing from nothing. Why should we? And why should we tell you?"

"I figured you might know something," Farrel said, almost indifferently and looking away, looking at the door to the bar where a couple of men in work clothes were hesitating as if about to go in. "You've got a car. You live here. You get around."

"So that means we'll squeal to the first railroad bull that asks us?"

"Why not?"

They sat silent, looking at Farrel. One was a little younger, he decided; a year or so. The older one had started to shave and smoke and maybe drink a little and the other one was imitating his brother. The one behind the wheel had the driver's license.

"I thought you might have some ideas worth listening to," Farrel said, pushing away from the door. He started to walk away, then as if remembering something, stopped and took out his wallet, extracted a card. "Here's my name. You can call the L.A. number collect if you come up with anything." He flipped the card in through the open window.

The one sitting beside the driver snatched the card and read it, and tried not to grin. The driver looked out at Farrel. "We knew you was going to try to pin it on us."

Now Farrel pretended a slack-jawed surprise. "No kidding? Is that what you thought? You're way, way out. This job was done by a professional. Couldn't you see that?"

They seemed confused.

Farrel leaned closer and his voice became confidential, secretive. "Keep your eyes open and keep looking around. Like you did to-night. And don't lose that phone number."

He walked away, went into the bar and ordered a drink.

He waited. It was possible that they might come in now. But perhaps not. There might be a few arguments first. The young one would want to show off what he knew to seem important, and the older one would put up the arguments.

They had something to tell, something you couldn't beat out of them.

Maybe, Farrel thought over his third drink, I'll get it out my way.

Chapter Eleven

Mrs. Partside stepped inside the door, stood looking at Mrs. Collins over beside the window. There was intense silence in the room. There seemed not even the sound of breathing.

The lamp on the bedside table could be dimmed by turning off the globe under the shade and switching on a tiny bulb in the translucent china base. This night light was all that was burning now and the room was dim. About all that Mrs. Partside could see distinctly was the rumpled bed and the white figure over in the chair, and the woman's shining fearful eyes.

For a moment a feeling of pity softened Mrs. Partside. The woman looked so frail, so beaten and desperate.

"Mrs. Collins . . ."

"Can't you leave me alone? Can't you just let me watch and

listen? Do you have to keep hounding me? Am I bothering anyone else on the floor? Am I keeping anyone awake?"

The harsh shrilling voice destroyed that moment of pitying softness.

"You're raising your voice and people will be disturbed," Mrs. Partside told her. "I want you back in bed and I want those windows shut and the blinds drawn."

"No."

Mrs. Partside looked at her attentively for a moment, then stepped back into the hall. In another moment she had returned with reinforcements, two big women dressed in white. One of the newcomers carried a canvas garment with long sleeves and white tape ties.

They were not cruel, simply efficient. In less than three minutes they had Mrs. Collins in bed and in the camisole, arms wrapped and tied behind her. They straightened the bed professionally. Then they brought in steel rails and fixed them to either side, so that the bed became a crib.

Mrs. Partside filled the bedside glass from a carafe, inserted a clean glass straw and tried to offer Mrs. Collins a last drink of water.

Mrs. Collins spat at her, and began to screech.

Mrs. Partside, losing her temper for the first time after holding it during all the threshing and kicking, during which she'd taken bad blows in the shins and stomach—in spite of her own care and Mrs. Collins' seeming frailness—leaned above the bed and gave Mrs. Collins a hard slap. "Now listen to me," she said in such a quietly evil tone that Mrs. Collins was shocked into momentary stillness. "If you keep screeching like that I'm going to phone Doctor. He'll order me to give you a strong sedative. A very strong sedative."

Mrs. Collins seemed to shrink down into the depths of the camisole.

"If the sedative doesn't stop you, I'm going to apply direct measures. I'm going to tape your mouth shut."

For a moment it appeared that Mrs. Collins would argue about it, and then she simply nodded.

"Now, good night," said Mrs. Partside. "We'll turn out your light and you must go to sleep."

Before she left the room Mrs. Partside made sure that the windows were closed and that the blinds covered the panes completely. She didn't quite believe that preposterous story the daughter had told her—she wondered if there might be a touch of psychosis running through the family—but still, it didn't hurt to check. She even peeped from behind the blind at the quiet, dark street.

For a while after Mrs. Partside and the others had gone, Mrs. Collins lay rigid, breathing heavily, her thoughts such a whirlpool of hatred that she felt she must explode. After some of the excitement had died away, she tested the camisole, thinking that in the hurry and struggle some mistakes might have been made. But the straitjacket was unyielding. She managed to kick free of the covers and roll over against the steel bars that now closed in the bed, but this was as far as she could get.

She ached horribly from the unaccustomed exercise. Every limb seemed on fire, every muscle and joint throbbled with pain.

She tried to sit up but the stiffness of the long canvas garment prevented this.

The dark seemed close and stuffy. She listened, but heard no sound from the corridor nor from any other part of the building. "I'm all alone," she said into the dark, silent room.

She lay there, eyes wide; and then tears came. She cried in self-pity and exhaustion, and bitter memories kept her company.

She cried because her girls had been such a disappointment. They were hateful, disobedient children. They clung to their father's Church, though she had done every reasonable thing to bring them to their senses. They ignored her explicit demands in other ways—for instance, Stephanie and school. Stephanie could have quit school and got a job, as cute as she was, started making money, married someone who would have provided a lovely home and a place for her mother besides. Really, it was Shelly's fault.

Shelly had made her sister stay in school, and she had antagonized Tommy. Actually Shelly was to blame for it all.

Such a welling of hatred for Shelly rose in Mrs. Collins that the tears dried and for a moment she lay there, stiff, silent, her burning eyes fixed on the dark.

Suddenly she thought of Tommy, the way he'd been when he was little, a sturdy little boy with fair hair and a stubby freckled nose who loved going barefoot, who collected shiny stones and odd bits of mechanical stuff, little wheels and springs and knobs . . . and who, when he was ten, made some kind of bomb and blew up the neighbor's cat inside the neighbor's trash can.

The first trouble.

Tommy had always been so tractable, so loving, so obedient. It was hard to understand where he got that quirk, that meanness about exploding things.

She rolled away from the bars, back to the middle of the bed. She tested the camisole again. There seemed a slight loosening. She jerked and tugged, but her arms wouldn't come free. Trussed like a chicken, she thought angrily.

When Tommy had been sixteen, he'd gotten mad at the high school principal and put something in the exhaust of the man's car. When the motor warmed up, something exploded, tearing the muffler and exhaust pipe and the underside of the car to ribbons.

No one knew Tommy had done it. Only she had known.

The next day she'd tried to talk to Tommy. She remembered how he'd come down late for breakfast—the girls were already gone—and how she had hinted to him that she knew he had been making something in the garage, and where was it now, and wasn't it queer Mr. Dennis's car had blown up like that?

The memory was vivid now against the dark. Tommy had been spooning sugar over a bowl of cereal. His hands had looked blunt, almost square in shape, and yet graceful. His hair and skin had shone cleanly in the morning light. He had glanced up at her with the sugar bowl in his hands, and she had expected some flush of guilt, some sign of shame or of fear that she might give him away.

Instead, slowly and mockingly, Tommy had winked at her!

And then . . . somehow . . . after that, they were conspirators! Other things happened, strange and bad things, and she never told anyone of her suspicions, and Tommy had made wise remarks that frightened her, that she tried to ignore.

How could Tommy have believed, there at the end, that *she* had been the one who had betrayed him by calling the cops?

Hadn't he learned to trust her, all that long time? And hadn't she always kept perfect faith?

In anger and despair she twisted, and all her arthritic joints burst with fire. The pain seemed to flow into her spine and up into her brain, so that it seemed her head must burst with agony.

Breathless, she stopped struggling, lay quiet, and in that instant she heard a scratch of sound from outside. Against the wall, so that the wall transmitted it into the room—but *outside!*

Something . . . someone . . . was moving against the wall, out there in the night beyond the windows!

She lay stiff, not breathing; it seemed that even her heart stopped in that intense effort to be silent, to catch each scrap of sound!

She wet her lips. "Tommy . . ."

Trembling seized her; and then was washed away in a flood of happy realization. If Tommy did come, if he did climb through that window, even if he came to kill her, she would convince him! She would make him see the truth. He would know at last that she had always been his friend. Even the lawyer hadn't been able to change his ideas, but now she would!

She lifted her head eagerly, turning toward the far wall, seeing nothing but the dark. Her head hurt, there was a pulsing in her ears. But above this, there now definitely was a noise, a kind of bumping and faint rattling. Tommy *was* there!

"Tommy," she called, trying again to sit up.

Wasn't there a kind of sputtering? A burning, sparks-flying, sort of sound?

"Tommy, no, don't do it!" she screamed.

But it was too late. Her cry seemed caught up, echoed into a

higher pitch, enlarged to thunder, roaring disaster, a million monsters, as the whole wall and the night outside, the world of splintering wood and stone and brick came smashing into the room.

A long spear of wood from the window frame, old pine long dried and silvered by the dry California sun, shot like an arrow through the dark and pinned her to the bed.

The telephone woke Shelly from a light, uneasy sleep. She switched on a lamp and stumbled into the living room, and tried to understand what Mrs. Partside was yelling over the wire. After a few words, a black tide of fright seized her, numbing her mind, and some time later she roused to find the phone still in her hand and someone rapping on the door outside.

She put the phone into its cradle, switched on the porch light, opened the door. The two men on the porch displayed police identification and asked to come in.

Shelly excused herself for a moment and went for a robe. Modesty seemed a ridiculous thing right now but the habit of being decently covered was long ingrained. When she returned and opened the screen the men came in walking warily, their faces sharp with attention, looking all around.

She invited them to take chairs. The mechanics of hospitality seemed hollow and unreal. She brushed back her hair, tried to compose herself, to concentrate on these two police detectives and what they wanted.

They asked a great many questions about her mother and about Tommy, and she supplied details. She tried to keep her thoughts off the horror that kept bobbing to the surface; if she didn't keep iron control she would break down. In a minute or so, one of the men got up and went through the place, very quietly, behind Shelly's back. She knew—he was looking for Tommy of course. He thought she might be hiding Tommy here. In that instant Shelly faced the fact that her mother had hated her, that Mrs. Partside had known it and had told the police. They thought that she might approve of Tommy's act.

After a long discussion, and questions, during which the two detectives seemed not at all unsympathetic, the suggestion was made that Shelly might want to come downtown, dictate a statement and sign it, and later make positive identification of her mother at the morgue. Her mother would look fine, they assured her. She wouldn't seem destroyed, or mangled. She was dead, but she'd been killed by a long spear of wood that had pierced and killed her almost instantly.

Shelly agreed. She went into her bedroom to dress. Standing at the closet door, a garment in her hand, she shook as if with the ague. The years seemed to sweep past her, the long wash of time, and she remembered things she thought she had forgotten. The little, cruel, endless pinches out of the long-ago that reminded her that Tommy had always been the loved one, the cherished and petted one; that she . . . Shelly . . . had been the servant, the chore girl; that Stephanie had been a bright bit of merchandise to be groomed and sold. Sold, so that Tommy could have a good home and a car and the luxuries he wanted.

A thousand schemes . . . her mother's . . . rose up like tattered ghosts. There had been so many hopes, so many plans. For Tommy. And now Tommy had repaid her.

He hadn't waited for the schemes to come true, for Shelly to get a brilliant job, for Stephanie to make a profitable marriage.

Stephanie . . .

Standing before the open closet, Shelly's thoughts came to a sudden turn. The past faded away. It was now, the present, and the police were waiting for her to dress, to be taken downtown. A formality, as they'd explained. A way to get her out of the house so they could stake it out and wait for Tommy. But they hadn't . . . no, they hadn't once . . . mentioned Stephanie.

If she kept quiet . . .

The only safety for Stephanie was silence, hiddenness.

She went on dressing, her fingers numb, stiff.

I won't say anything. If they ask, I'll have to tell, of course. But perhaps they won't think, just yet, to wonder about the other one

of us. And then they won't go looking for Stephanie, getting her name and her picture into the paper, leading Tommy to her. Stephanie will have to come to Mama's funeral but that won't be for several days. And perhaps by then they'll have caught Tommy.

Dressed at last, chilled but in control of herself, Shelly went out to face what must be done.

The rest of the night went by, not quickly.

The thing she remembered best, afterward, was her mother's face under the morgue lights.

In the instant of recognition, Shelly realized that her mother looked exactly as she had unconsciously expected: as if at the end her worst forebodings had come true, and that in the moment of dissolution she had washed her hands of all of them.

The desert night was still, very dark, and growing colder.

Reves shrugged, trying to loosen his stiffened muscles, then stood up from the steps of the ramp and walked back and forth. He wondered if Farrel had made a last check on the Deppler kids and gone home to L.A. He decided, probably.

Like the rest of the cops in his office, Reves hated stakeouts. They were boring. Time passed slowly. You had nothing to do but think, and to think was to remember, and Reves was tired of remembering.

The moment of action was brief, usually, if it came at all.

He looked up at the stars, unusually large and close-looking out here in the desert sky. He tried to recall the lessons of his high school science teacher, the little astronomy she'd tried to drum into them, the positions of the North Star, and the two dippers, and other constellations; but nothing remained. What he did remember was the teacher's face, looking at the class over the desk. Mrs. Chalmers had always seemed weary, unpowdered, unpressed, and cynical. He decided that at the time he'd been in her science class, she'd been about ready to retire.

A long time ago. A long way away.

A desert insect scratched out a hesitant chirp, off across the

stunted sage, and in the silence that followed Reves heard the liquid drip of water into the can under the trough. That's how still it is, he thought; that can is nowhere near, it's over under the rocks behind the hoppers. You forget, living in town, how sound can carry.

He decided that the sound of his own footsteps could carry equally well.

He sat down on the steps again. He wished he had something to do, like smoking. He hadn't learned to smoke because of his father's sense of economy. To smoke was to make waste. It was burning up something that cost money. There was an entire industry built up upon the growing and processing and selling of tobacco for idiots to smoke, and he could remember his father's raving about it.

I wonder, Reves thought, why I didn't learn to smoke just to aggravate him? I did so many other things for just that reason.

The memory of his father brought with it all the old self-hatred, the sense of failure and regret.

"I didn't *want* him to die," Reves said half-aloud into the dark.

The silence seemed to answer with disbelief.

And then he heard the car coming. Unmistakably the sound of a motor, the noise of tires, though there were no lights.

Chapter Twelve

Without a sound Reves faded from the steps into the deeper dark behind the loading ramp.

The purring motor came nearer, but with a lazy slowness. The car must be creeping along, and through sand now, since the tires no longer crunched on gravel. As Reves listened, the hollow stillness around him, and the dark and the night sky above all, seemed drawn to a pinpoint of focus upon the sound of the car.

There were still no lights, no reflected glow, though Reves found himself straining to see them.

Then he realized that the noise of the motor was growing no louder. The car had stopped. The purring continued for another moment and then was gone, cut off, and the night seemed suddenly empty. Then, almost inaudible, came something else—he decided that it had been the sound of the car door. Reves drew in a deep breath. His mouth felt dry. Somebody would be coming now.

He reached automatically for the gun, loosening it, lifting it a little in the holster. He kept the flashlight in his left hand, his thumb on the switch.

He had no way of judging how far away the car had stopped. In this desert silence sound carried abnormally. The car could have been left around a turn in the road, even behind a hill, out of sight even by daylight. And whoever was in it could be coming, not from the road, but from some other direction entirely. There could be a trail, a short cut, that he knew nothing about. There could be a way to circle the station and come up behind it.

For what seemed an eternity there was no further sound.

There was nothing to be seen, either. Reves' posture grew awkward, then almost painful. He wanted to move a little, to shift his feet, anything to relieve the tension building in his body, and he didn't dare. He tried to relax, consciously willing himself not to tighten up. He breathed lightly through his mouth, and several times found his tongue jutting from between his teeth as if to taste the dark.

Somebody was pretty close now. He knew it without being able to explain to himself how he knew. Some tentacle of sense had touched that other one, or more than one, out there. There had been a pad of footstep, or hiss of breath, too soft to be separated from the hollow quiet.

There was sweat on his face and he caught himself lifting his right hand off the gun butt, involuntarily, to brush it away.

He thought of the Deplers, cunning kids, gone all bad, and wondered if they were out there with cat's eyes, grinning at him.

Suddenly there was a sound on the air, a sound he wouldn't have believed except that in this affair he was able to believe almost anything.

Someone was humming.

He shook his head as if to clear the crazy sound away, but it persisted. It was real. Out here in the desert night someone was humming a tune to himself. It was a private sound, Reves recognized in that first shock of surprise. It was thoughtful, concentrating. It was the kind of humming, he thought, that you did when you were busy and thinking of something else. In the next moment he knew that the unseen one had passed the small office at the end of the ramp and was going on toward the hoppers. If this were the Depplers there should be two sets of footsteps, and he listened, hoping.

Perhaps the two were walking in unison. . . . He dismissed the idea. It was too farfetched. If this were one of the Depplers, he had come out from town alone, or he had left his brother at the car. On guard. This second idea had some logic, Reves decided.

Walking as quietly as he could, Reves crossed the space behind the loading ramp, down to the other end, to the corner of the small office, and took up a new post. Here he could dimly see the towering structure of the hoppers and should be able to catch any glow of light out at the improvised camp. At the same time he was less exposed. Too, if anyone went into the office he would be able to hear what went on. The chances seemed pretty good that the office would be inspected sooner or later.

There was a sudden small flare of flame out under the hoppers. It burned for a moment or so, a match-spark under the vast dark sky, and then abruptly went out. Reves frowned. He wondered if he had left some careless sign of his prowling. The quick dousing of the light seemed to imply alarm.

But perhaps not. He drew in a deep breath and tried to force himself, again, to relax. There was no use building up a tissue of speculation. He had to keep his mind open, be ready for anything.

So, wait.

He waited. And nothing happened. Time went by. The stars burned in the black night, cold and far away, the wind blew, there was the desert smell. He was alone in the silence. It was a lonely feeling.

Then a sound came, a muffled walking. Someone mounted the steps at the other end of the platform and came directly toward him. Reves listened closely but could find no sign of hesitation or caution, though the sound wasn't loud. Everyone, he thought to himself, walks more quietly at night. It's an instinct, something out of the long-ago.

He found himself analyzing the footsteps, and the sudden idea came that this wasn't one of the Depplers at all. He felt like shaking his head to clear his ears. He couldn't place the source of this new, uneasy thought, but it seemed that this person coming nearer was someone older, heavier, than a teen-age kid. He tried to force himself to an even closer concentration, but now the impression vanished. The steps seemed to be approaching at about the level of his head, though the platform was not quite that high at this end.

A tiny alarm rang in his mind. He had thought that, of course, the newcomer would pass straight along to the front of the small office, the strip of platform that made a space like a small porch before the door, and there strike another light.

But suppose it happened otherwise? Suppose the light were struck this side of the wall? Reves couldn't judge, in the dark, just how much shelter the corner of the office would give him. It would be better to duck.

Something said, better duck now; his subconscious reaction to the slowing of the footsteps. As Reves squatted below the level of the platform, there was the scratch of metal and a flaring yellow glow melted the dark. A lighter, Reves thought, putting his hands to the dirt to steady himself, to prevent even the smallest grating of shoe leather.

In another moment the glow was gone, though he could catch some reflection of its pallor on the dark beyond the underpinnings of the loading platform. He rose cautiously, and listened. He

thought that the other man was around at the front now, peering in perhaps through the doorpane. There had been no sound of the door opening.

Reves took the gun out of the holster on his hip and kept it in his hand. It was time to find out who this was.

He moved—making no sound that he could hear—around to the side of the office, and started for the front of the platform. He had taken no more than a couple of steps in that direction when the door banged the inside wall. There seemed to be a brief, violent whisper of movement within the office. Then the thin reflection of light vanished and he heard the other man make a long leap off the platform's edge and hit the dirt, running.

Reves winced in anger at himself, at some carelessness he hadn't even known, and began to run too, trying to run silently. He could hear the other pounding off into the distance.

Something had tipped his hand. Some arrangement of the stuff in the office, some secret of warning, had frightened the quarry.

Reves ran on into the dark, trying to sense obstacles, and then realized something.

The other sounds had stopped. There was no noise of a running man out there. There was nothing but the empty night. He pulled to a quick halt, listened. The other man might have dropped into a hole, for any sound of him now.

No, not dropped into a hole, Reves corrected himself. The other had stopped to listen and by now he knew that someone was after him.

Reves waited, the gun and the light in his hands. There was sweat on his face, damp under the trace of breeze. Reves decided that he had nothing to lose by showing a light, perhaps even had something to gain. Holding the flashlight away at arm's length, he clicked it on and circled the area ahead in a swift arc. Probably he was somewhat visible in its reflection, he thought. He saw the scattered clumps of brush, oddly green, greener than life it seemed. He saw the ruts of the road, then other paths, shallow marks that

showed up under the slanting light and led away in all directions, paths made by desert burros and jackrabbits and coyotes coming to drink at the little spring. Under the passing beam something glowed metallically. Reves thought it must be a tin can. But he couldn't see any shape like that of a man.

He felt warning prickles of danger and thought then of turning the light back toward the office to catch a possibly circling adversary, but this would have put him between the reflected glow and the area in which the running man had disappeared.

He clicked the light off and waited, and listened again.

The other man hadn't been far away, after all. The attack came with a rush.

Reves' ears caught the snarl of sound a moment before the other man hit him. He got off a shot by reflex, knowing it was wild even as the sound cracked the night, and then tried to lift the gun, to bring it down on the head of the other man, dropped the light, jerked up a knee; but then he was spinning backward under the impact and the gun rattled off across the dirt as he grappled with the sinewy foe.

Any thought that he might be involved with one of the Depplers vanished in that instant.

Hands grabbed for his face in the dark, and he tried to fend them off with his forearms.

This other man felt as if he were made of whipcord and wire. His skin seemed hard under Reves' grip, without resilience, as tough as the bone beneath. This other man had kept himself in condition for a long time. He was like a finely tuned machine. And Reves knew that he was in trouble now.

He tried to twist away, to break the grip of the searching hands and to keep his knee up between them. Reves knew a lot of tricks, tried to keep in fairly good shape, but as he gripped the muscled neck and felt it snap away, grabbed a shoulder and found it tough as stone, he knew that this other had worked hard to keep himself at the peak, day after day, without letup . . . somewhere.

A hand clamped itself on Reves' lower jaw and began to push, and Reves felt a great tearing pressure under his ear, as though part of his face were being ripped away. He managed to lower his chin so that his shoulder could take the punishing thrust, but this was a near thing. This adversary could tear you apart. He was inching the hand up now to bring the pressure to Reves' nose, and Reves knew what would happen then.

Reves drove his knee upward to bring a counterpressure. Dirt filled his nose and throat; he felt it grinding into his clothes. Reves lay on his left side now. By straining with every muscle, gathering his last resource of strength, and using the bent knee as a lever, he managed to fling himself over. He tried to smash the other man down on the dirt with a lot of force, but it was like trying to out-manuever a cat. The pressure went off his face, though, as the other man used his arms to break his fall.

Reves worked to get the sinewy body between his knees, with the hope of using a scissors-hold to pull the other down. But as Reves strained and writhed, hampered by his twisted clothes and the hands grappling again at his face, he had a heart-bursting moment of wondering if he was going to make it.

Or would Farrel come looking for him, sometime tomorrow, and find his faceless body stretched here where this maniac had left him?

He hunched himself, then thrust outward with the knee and had the satisfaction of hearing the other grunt.

Then the inexplicable happened.

The other man wrenched himself free, reached back for one last jab, stiff-fingered, that must have been meant for Reves' eyes and instead caught him raggedly on the cheek—and then was gone!

Reves grabbed for him, and touched empty air. He crawled to his knees, shook his head, listened groggily.

Nothing.

Sucking in breath, the pulse pounding in his ears, Reves got his feet under him and stood hunched, on the defense, waiting, ex-

pecting at any moment for that madman to come back to him. He felt dirt sifting from his clothes. The whole side of his face seemed raw and torn.

But nothing happened.

After some minutes of dizzy, ringing, half-deafened silence he caught the sound of the car in the distance. The motor woke and there was a clash of gears. Reves kicked around frantically for the flashlight, found it, used the light to get his gun. But the sounds of the car had vanished into the distance.

He started to run for his own car, and then slowed, knowing he'd never overtake the other, had no way of recognizing him if he did.

End of stakeout, Reves told himself.

The night seemed cold, silent, remote; and he was aware of a sense of failure.

He checked the stuff in the small office, went out to the camping place under the hoppers, but found no changes. He decided to leave the stuff where it all was, on the slim chance the visitor would come again.

Then he headed for his car.

In Sagebloom the bar and the stores were shut, darkened. A single bare light hung high overhead at the intersection by the closed service station. Reves looked around for Farrel, not really expecting to see him, and then started down the highway toward Palmdale to talk to the men in the Sheriff's office there, when it suddenly occurred to him to take a turn up through the unpaved roads that led to the houses scattered on the hills.

He found Farrel. Farrel was propped behind the wheel of the company car, pulled to the side of the unpaved track. Perhaps Reves had wakened him; he was yawning when he got out of the car in the glow of the headlights.

He came back toward Reves, rubbing the gray stubble of whiskers, looking tired and old. When he got close, Reves could smell the whisky. Farrel propped himself against the door and

looked in at Reves; there was some light from the dash, and Farrel said, "How's the other guy look?"

Reves touched his tender jaw. "It shows?"

"Looks like he used sandpaper," Farrel said.

"He got away." Reves opened the door and stood, stretching his stiffening muscles, while he told Farrel what had happened at Painted Creek spur. "It wasn't the Deppler kids," he finished. "I'm sure of it."

"I am, too," Farrel agreed. "I've been here all night, and nobody's stirred. The old lady came out on the porch a couple of times and looked around. I could see her white nightgown. I guess she spotted me down here. Anyhow, the kids haven't come out and their car's in the yard." He began to tell Reves about the trip to Las Pulgas, and what he had said to the two juveniles, and how he had waited in the bar. "They didn't come in. When I parked here, they were working on the innards of the Buick with an extension light. They went inside sometime after ten, and pretty soon all the house lights went out."

"It's not the Depplers at all," Reves said.

"Oh, don't put them out in the clear like that," Farrel said. "They know something about all of this. They're smart, they keep their eyes open, they know this country like the backs of their hands. They've got the old wreck to run around in. Wonder where they steal the gas? Anyway, I've got more to say to that pair."

"I'm glad you're doing it," Reves agreed. "I'm afraid I wouldn't keep my hands off them."

"Maybe I had a different upbringing than you. Maybe you were taught to be nice and respectful to older people, and show good manners, and so on. Me . . . well, when I was their age I wasn't any angel, let's say."

Reves couldn't imagine Farrel as having once been a wild kid. He shook his head a little and Farrel suppressed a grin.

"Well, let's talk to the local law," Farrel said. "See you in Palm-dale."

"I'll see you there."

Chapter Thirteen

Shelly Collins woke in the gray, gritty dawn and sat up quickly, still almost asleep, dazed, caught in the vivid memory of the dream.

In the dream she had opened her door and stepped out upon the small porch. In the yard below, under the green shadows of the eucalyptus trees, Tommy had stood looking up at her. He had seemed very young, untouched by all that had gone before, and yet somehow sad and reproachful, too. She had felt no sense of horror, of wrong over her mother's death. Instead she had called down, "Tommy, why did you do it?" as if asking the answer to a riddle.

In the gray morning Tommy had looked at her sadly and said, "But *I* didn't. You did, Shelly. You did. You put Ma in that place where she couldn't get out. You stuck her in that room like a bug on a pin. Then when you found the letter from the rest home in your mailbox, when you saw that it must have been there all day, and then even when you found out Ma had been sitting by that window and looking out at the street, you didn't get her out of there."

Shelly's throat had shut with shock, but not before she had whispered, "You killed her, not I."

"If you had hurried to get her away from there, I might not have found her again very soon."

"You would have followed us wherever we went!"

In the dream, Tommy's figure had begun to fade; and she had thought with the irrationality common to dreams how hateful he was to leave this way before the accusations were settled. "Maybe not."

"Yes, yes, you would have followed us!"

She had forgotten Tommy's laughter, until she had heard it in the dream.

"You can't be sure!"

By now Tommy was no more than a glowing outline.

Before he goes entirely, Shelly had thought, accepting the strange disappearance, I must make him promise to leave Stephanie alone. She had opened her mouth to speak and then caution had stopped her. Maybe Tommy had *forgotten* Stephanie. Or maybe killing Mother had been enough. She remembered, sitting here in bed now, chilled and shaking, how she had hesitated in the dream, torn by the dilemma.

The dilemma was still with her. It had survived the dream. It was real and urgent.

What to do about Stephanie.

She shut her mind on the memory of the dream because she couldn't endure the memory of what the phantom Tommy had said. She couldn't face the possibility that she had, indeed, been the careless agent of her mother's destruction. Oh . . . if she had just—Something tore through her, and she buried her face in her hands.

No, no.

Get back to the problem of Stephanie.

The police would come back, perhaps soon now. There would have been a great deal of information gathered about Tommy Collins and his background and all his connections. Someone in the Los Angeles Police Department would have talked to the Sheriff at home.

People at home would find out, during this day, the further history of Tommy Collins, the kid his mother had spoiled, the kid who could never come to a good end—Shelly could imagine the gossip, racing like the wind.

I don't care, she told herself, cringing inwardly. I don't know those people any more. I'll never see any of them again.

Small comfort.

She got out of bed, finally awake now, shrugged into a robe and went on into the front room and into the dining-and-kitchen alcove.

The mechanics of getting through the day faced her; she must somehow prepare food and eat it, bathe, dress, go to work. But no, surely she needn't go to the job today . . . She would phone in. What had she been thinking of? At a time of loss like this . . .

She stood still by the kitchen counter, hands on the cool tile, and tried to fight away the tearing sense of grief.

I loved you very much, Mother. I did, I did. And now you're gone and I won't ever be able to speak to you again. . . .

The years of nagging disapproval she had suffered, the quarrels, the hostile disparagement of all she had believed in, these stood there like a wall and now would endure forever, could not be melted by loving reconciliation, by a final forgiveness.

That last word, the word Shelly had always believed would be spoken, sometime, somehow, the word that would bring her and her mother into agreement, the word of a child for its loving parent and of an approving parent for its child—this word was stillborn. It would never be.

The sense of grief that smote her then was so crushing, so overwhelming, that Shelly cried out in shock. She swung around and the gray light seemed to shatter, and tears welled up. She was lost, without anchor. All the things that had filled her days, the plans, the careful purposes, were gone.

No, not quite.

There was still Stephanie.

Shelly fought back the disastrous sense of failure, of everything worthwhile having ended. I must call the convent at once, she thought. I must warn the Sisters.

Will what I have to say frighten them terribly?

She thought about it. No, she decided; less than other people, no doubt. But first I must plan. I mustn't leave Stephanie there, the way I left Mother at Mrs. Partside's.

Where to go, then? And how to get Stephanie away safely?

Confused ideas whirled through her mind.

She sat down in the dinette. There was no sound at all. The

stillness seemed waiting and ominous, promising only danger. Think. *Think.*

Reves went to the Special Agent's office at eight. He'd had three hours sleep. The side of his face had stiffened since the fight and now when he moved his jaw he felt as if that whole side of his head was about to split off in a chunk. He'd showered, changed from the wrecked, dusty clothes.

When he went in Pete had just hung his hat on the old-fashioned rack and was settling at his desk, a newspaper thrown there in front of him. When Reves came in, Pete looked up eagerly. Reves saw that Ryerson was already at his desk in the glassed-in part of the office, and was going past, when Pete said, "Wait a minute."

Reves paused and Pete added, "Take a look at this."

Reves looked absently at the headlines, something about an explosion and an elderly woman being found dead, and with his mind full of angry frustration over what had happened last night at Painted Creek, he was about to grunt some comment and pass on, and then he saw a name.

He bent over the desk then and read thoughtfully through what was on the front page, and turned to the continuation of the story inside.

He glanced at Pete, and Pete began telling him something about the Collins family. It seemed that somebody named Shelly Collins worked here in the building, worked for Freight Claims, and Pete seemed to know a lot about her.

"Wait a minute," Reves interrupted. "This is Los Angeles, this explosion in the rest home. It's at least sixty miles from downtown L.A. to Palmdale. Add on the mileage at either end—this rest home isn't downtown—and you've got over a hundred miles, maybe a hundred and a quarter, maybe even a hundred and fifty."

"So?" Pete said smugly. "You're saying he couldn't have done it?"

"Time," Reves said, deliberately patient. He saw Ryerson looking out at him through the glass, smoking what might be the first cigar of the day, wondering why Reves wasn't coming on in and making

a full report on the dynamitings. "I'm saying he couldn't have blown up his mother and then—providing there was the least damned reason on earth to think he'd want to—go on out there where I tangled with him around two o'clock this morning."

"I'll bet he did it."

"Let me take this in to the boss." Reves scooped up the paper, more with an idea of getting away from Pete than anything else.

But when he opened the door and went in, Ryerson laid down the cigar and said, "What's Pete so excited about?" Something in his tone reminded Reves that Pete had been here for a long time . . . longer, he supposed, than anyone except the boss himself and perhaps old man Richardson . . . and that Pete, sitting here in the office, had been the anchor man for hundreds of investigations as they had progressed, tying together bits and scraps to make a sensible whole for Ryerson's decisions, bits that had been gathered over a large territory and in some cases over a long period of time.

But even Pete could go off on some cockeyed tangent.

Reves put the paper down without comment.

Ryerson read slowly, picking up the cigar for an occasional puff, and then looked at Reves and said, "Dynamite, huh? What's the connection?"

"Pete thinks— Well, to begin with, we had an M.O. bulletin on this Thomas Collins a few days back. Has a grudge against railroads. Loves blowing up things and people with dynamite. Went to prison back there in the Middle West, and dynamited his way out. According to the bulletin, Collins was believed to have sneaked into Mexico. I imagine he had told somebody in the prison that Mexico would be where he'd go if he ever got out."

Ryerson studied the cigar smoke. "Now he's here, obviously. Any reason he couldn't be the one we're looking for?"

"I just can't see it, though Pete has this hunch of his," Reves said. "I can't figure the time, the distance, the locations. They don't jibe." Reves shook his head impatiently. "This business last night, this murder, took some planning. He must have had to hang around, and have his stuff there, and be ready for his chance when it came.

I don't think he could have just trotted up to that nursing home when the mood seized him. He'd have to spend time waiting." Reeves tried to see whether Ryerson was following him, and if he agreed. "From what the paper says, the woman had been in fear of her life. That implies hiding, making it hard for her son to find her. He had to run her down in a city the size of L.A. So now . . . remember this character we've been looking for in the desert. He's been busy up there, not down here. And there's plenty of distance between the two places."

"Maybe this guy you ran into last night wasn't really the one we wanted," Ryerson suggested. "Maybe he wasn't the one who had stashed the supplies at all. He might have been just a bum, looking for a place to sleep. Maybe he just happened along."

"You go up to Painted Creek and see if it looks like a place a bum would hunt for in the middle of the night, to go to sleep," Reeves advised grimly.

Reves and Farrel had called in to the night sergeant from Palm-dale, so Ryerson already knew the night's principal events. He seemed to be thinking these over, puffing on the cigar. "Call Pete in here, will you?"

Pete came in with a look of being ready to explain everything. Reeves went to a chair and sat down. Pete began telling Ryerson all about the girl, Shelly Collins, and now he added something—a person pretending to represent a loan company had obtained her address through Personnel. "That was her brother," Pete said with assurance. "He's been out of prison for a while but he's been too busy to look her up. He's been setting up a base of operations out of town and he's been stealing dynamite and experimenting with it. Also there were a few other things he had to manage, like stealing a car to get around in and holding up a few service stations and liquor stores for spending money, and getting different clothes and some supplies. He didn't do any of these things in L.A. Probably he stole the car . . . no, a succession of cars . . . on the way out to the coast."

Reves remembered some of the newspaper account. "These people, the mother and sister, must have been scared to death. You'd think they'd cover their trail better."

"I'll bet they thought they had covered it," Pete said. "But those little towns—everybody knows everybody's business. And even in prison, Collins could keep track."

"I still don't see how it can tie in with what we've got up there past Palmdale," Reves said.

"He's got to have a car," Pete argued, "and with a car he can go anywhere—fast. You can say, sure, the freeways are stuffed with traffic and what's the point of holing up so far away, and all that. But the traffic thins out at night. He can choose his time to come and go. I'll lay ten bucks on the line, any time, that says the guy up there and the one who blew up his mother is the same one."

"Save your money," Reves grinned.

"No, I mean it."

Ryerson said, "Anyway, I want a conference set up with L.A.P.D., Pete. I want to go over everything they've got on Collins. His history makes him interesting to us whether he's playing with our railroad property or not. See if you can get something fixed up for this afternoon, will you?"

Pete nodded with an air of satisfaction.

Ryerson looked at Reves. "I want you to interview this girl who works for us, this Shelly Collins. Maybe she came to work today—not likely, but maybe. If she isn't at work in Freight Claims, go to her house."

Reves stood up. To himself he thought, the girl might well be in a rest home herself after what had happened to her mother.

Ryerson seemed to read his thought. "You might get more cooperation than you expect. She works for the railroad. She knows what we put up with in depredations."

"Yes, that's right."

"See if you can find out anything in her brother's background that might tie in with what's going on out there on the desert."

Reves couldn't look forward to forcing his questions on a girl as

recently bereaved as Miss Collins. Probably she'd be too upset to talk anyway.

Pete was waiting for him in the outer office. "Wait a minute. I'll call Freight Claims for you. What odds would you—"

"I'm not betting against you, Pete. She's not there."

When Pete put down the phone he said, "She called in as soon as the office opened. She didn't say anything about her mother, but somebody'd seen a paper and they knew."

Reves thought, well, this meant she hadn't cracked up and been put to bed under heavy sedation, or anything like that. Calling in early implied that she was keeping her head. Maybe she was a cold type, he thought. One of the efficient ones you found in the offices. Calm and collected. He felt a mild stirring of curiosity about Miss Collins.

"I can tell you how to get out there," Pete said, without explaining how he knew.

Reves thought about it while he drove out toward West L.A. He decided that Pete had felt they weren't moving fast enough. Nor intelligently enough.

The places on Ribbonwood Drive were not as western and ranchy and sprawling as the name had somehow implied to Reves. It was a rather ordinary, staid kind of street. He found the place Pete had described, a medium-sized home with a duplex apartment added at the rear.

Plenty of trees, Reves noted, and they were big ones. The house had been here for a while, but the apartments looked fairly new. There was somehow a hint of quiet isolation here, he thought. A place that might appeal to a girl trying to hide from a crazy brother. From the upstairs porch Reves looked down at the rear yard, the towering eucalyptus. The trees were old. They'd been here longer than anything.

Reves lifted his hand to knock, but then the inner door opened suddenly and the screen door was slamming outward at his face. He put up an arm, stepped back to keep from being hit.

The sight of the girl standing in the door, coat over her arm,

purse in hand, washed away any preconceived notions about a cold office type. This girl was beautiful. There was an air of strain about her, and hurry, and grief. Something more. In her eyes was terror.

She was scared. Reves thought he'd never seen anyone so desperately scared before in his life.

Chapter Fourteen

Stephanie had been awake ever since dawn.

When the rising bell had rung, she had been at the window, looking out at the greenery of the inner court. There had been a touch of mist out there, and a couple of brown birds, but these had only filled her with impatient longing. None of the windows of this place looked out at the world, the real world, she had thought, scratching a bare foot on the plaster wall to relieve an itching spot. The thought of her sister had crossed her mind then, and she had frowned. Her visions of Shelly always involved streets full of shop-windows and busy hurrying crowds, noise, big cars, and billboards about glamorous new shows.

And here I am.

Shut up like a convict.

But . . . just for today . . .

Her heart gave a kind of lurch then, half glad and half with a touch of fright at her own daring and naughty determination. If she got caught, what would Sister Superior say?

She imagined the scene with half-pleasurable torment.

"Out!"

And Shelly would come for her, and cry.

Then she'd be terribly sorry, and repentant. Probably she would cry, too, along with Shelly.

But . . . getting back to facts—*just for today*—!

She dressed quickly, her hands clumsy with nervousness, and prepared for Mass.

Later, in the refectory, she took her tray from the pass-through window and went to her place at one of the long tables. Erma was there, and when Stephanie sat down Erma edged away a little, but Stephanie whispered fiercely, "I want that dollar today. Before noon!"

Erma choked on her milk.

Stephanie then bent demurely above her tray and said her blessing.

Gooley eggs. Sister Justin couldn't cook. Why should she have to take a turn at messing around with the food like everyone else? The toast was cold, and felt leathery between Stephanie's impatient fingers. There was some little sacrifice being offered this week, for the Missions or something, and no one was eating any butter. The little dish of oatmeal looked waxy and congealed. Stephanie had a terrible moment of wanting to jump up and toss the tray somewhere, at the wall perhaps, and then scream.

A girl had done it once. The story had been passed on for a long time. The girl had thrown her tray, and the salt-and-peppers, and two glasses of milk. She had yelled things that weren't nice. Then Sister Superior had given her some terrific kind of penance. The kind of penance varied with the one who told the tale. Some said she had to kneel all night before the Blessed Sacrament, and one girl said she'd been shaved bald-headed with a razor, but Stephanie didn't believe this. The penances were never very severe.

Stephanie controlled the awful impulse, though her face broke out in a sweat. She ate the underdone scrambled eggs and the toast. It would be a sin against poverty to leave the mush, so she made Erma take it.

We never have things like hamburgers. Or tacos. We get about two Cokes a week, like little kids being allowed a treat. What a blast!

"What're you muttering about?" Erma wondered uneasily.

"Oh, just things. I want my hair cut."

"Get it cut today, then."

"It would take too much of the money. And they'd notice it."

"What *are* you going to do?" Erma sounded wistful, now. Erma was in here because she'd had the habit of forging checks out of her daddy's checkbook, and running with a bad gang, and stealing a chicken. That business about stealing the chicken made Stephanie wonder if Erma was all there, mentally. The chicken had been a ruffled miniature bantam in a pet shop and Erma had tried to carry it out under her sweater. And Erma had already been on probation about the checks, so that did it.

Stephanie regarded her coolly. She felt like making a dig, like, I'm going to make sure I stay out of pet stores; but she didn't. After all, Erma wasn't a creepy type. She was pretty good as a friend, in fact. "I'm going to a show. And I'm going to eat some tacos and have all the Cokes I want. Two or three at once, maybe."

"You'll get lost on the bus," Erma suggested hopefully.

"I've got a tongue. I can ask, can't I?"

"How'll you get back in again without getting caught?"

"You'll help. At around a quarter to five I'll come and scratch on that side door and if the coast is clear you'll scratch back. If you don't scratch back, I'll come around again in ten minutes. Most of the Sisters will be at prayers, anyway, so don't worry."

Then Stephanie looked across the room, and there by the doorway was Sister Bernard, heavy inside the white habit, looking around for somebody in her nearsighted way, her face as always mild and kind and friendly, and Stephanie felt such a wave of love and respect for this old nun, who had given her whole life to God and to the girls in this place, that for a moment she forgot her plan for the day, which just might get Sister into a terrific lot of trouble.

Then Stephanie noticed that Sister didn't have her keys with her, and wondered where she might have laid them down.

Sister Vincent had the telephone duty that morning, in the little portress' office off Sister Superior's headquarters.

Sister Vincent was young, but well-trained. She knew all of the

regulations regarding telephone calls. Beside each girl's name was a list of authorized persons with whom she might speak.

There were extension telephones in various parts of the convent, but only the one in the kitchen bore a dialing apparatus.

Use of the telephone was not to be taken lightly.

The nuns themselves were rigidly restricted as to how many personal calls they might make, to family and friends. The Order was not one of chatterers.

At about eight-forty the phone rang. Sister Vincent put down her book, lifted the phone off its cradle. "St. Catherine's Convent."

A man's voice said, "This is an emergency, Sister. I have to speak to Stephanie Collins immediately."

"Who is this calling, please?"

"I really don't have time to explain, Sister. I'm a friend of the family. Something pretty terrible has happened. It's very important that I speak to Stephanie before anyone else does."

Sister Vincent was human. She wanted to ask what the terrible thing was. But the typed list of rules was right there on the desk in front of her. And she knew who was allowed to speak to Stephanie. Just one person. Her sister, Shelly. Sister Vincent knew Shelly Collins' voice because she had been on telephone duty at times when Shelly had called.

For a moment, because she was young and this man sounded worried and insistent, Sister Vincent felt unsure of herself.

The man's voice came again, "Can't I speak to her just for a minute?"

"I . . . I'll ask Sister Superior for permission."

"No. No, wait a minute." Some of the tension seemed to have gone from his voice suddenly. "I've changed my mind. I think it would be better if I talked to her personally. This afternoon. I'll call again in an hour or so and arrange for an interview with your superior."

Now Sister Vincent was thoroughly puzzled. "Is anything wrong with Miss Shelly Collins?" she asked, thinking that Miss Collins may have met with an accident, or have been taken suddenly ill.

"Oh, no, not at all. Sister . . . I do have a favor to ask. Please don't mention this call to anyone. I'll explain when I call back again. It won't be too long."

Weirder and weirder. . . .

"Of course I can't keep secrets from Sister Superior," she reminded, thinking to herself that this person certainly didn't know anything about a convent.

"Secrets?" He laughed a little and the sound was warm and yet a little mocking. "Oh, I'm not asking you to keep secrets. This is just a . . . call it a confidence between the two of us. Hmm?"

Sister Vincent couldn't help smiling. He sounded younger now, than he had at first. And the whole tone of the conversation had changed. She felt as if she were being teased. In a perfectly proper way, of course. She wanted to ask, "But what was the terrible thing which has happened?" but now the question seemed out of place.

"I'll bet you *do* keep a secret once in a while, though, Sister. Now confess. Don't you? Just a little one? Such as who sneaked a cookie when she passed through the kitchen? Or who forgot to water Sister Superior's potted fern?"

He *did* know something about a convent, then, Sister Vincent thought, stifling a desire to giggle. "I didn't tell on Sister Clare," she admitted.

"And what had Sister Clare done?"

"Oh, that would be telling!" (I must cut off this silly conversation; it's really not dignified.)

"No, you've made me curious. What kind of trouble could she have got into if you'd told on her?"

"Not much of any, if at all."

"I know, I'll bet she made a mistake and put salt in the sugar bowls."

Again Sister repressed her giggles. "Nothing as bad as that."

Sister Clare had been supervising the laundry room three days past, and one of her charges had overbleached some towels to ribbons, and Sister hadn't mentioned the disaster, nor its tearful perpetrator, to Sister Superior.

"She had sneezing fits all through prayers. No, that wouldn't be it. They'd all know who was doing that."

Sister Vincent felt that she must put an end. She said with all the dignity she could muster, "I wouldn't tell you even if you guessed. Now look—call back soon. And I'll wait for your explanation."

"Oh, thank you, Sister!"

Sister Vincent hung up with a sense of having skirted some daring breach. She sat for a moment, thinking about the man who had just called. It had been a strange conversation.

That teasing way he had . . . He has sisters, she decided. She thought, he's grown up teasing the girls in his family.

Sister Vincent had every intention of telling Sister Superior about the call for Stephanie—which somehow hadn't been for Stephanie, or rather, not yet. But presently she was called away to help in the infirmary, and Sister Agnes, who was too old and arthritic to do any active work, sat by the telephone.

And the morning went by busily.

The girl backed away from Reves until she was back inside the door of the apartment.

He tipped his hat, and introduced himself, and took out his wallet and showed her his ID and the badge.

She had begun to look past him, as if someone might be down there in the yard, under the trees. "Yes? I talked to two detectives this morning. Early. Or perhaps it was more the middle of the night." She shook her head as if to dash away some confusion. "Is there something more? Something I haven't explained?" And before Reves could answer, she added, "I can't explain any of it. I don't know why he did it. He . . . he imagined things."

"Could I come in, Miss Collins?"

She didn't want him to come in. Either there was something to hide, or she was working now on pure nerve and was afraid she wasn't going to last.

Reves said, "I'm not with the Los Angeles Police Department. I

guess you didn't understand. I'm with the railroad. The one you work for."

"But I . . . I called in. I told them I couldn't come to work today. I have so much to do here." Her face took on a look of despair, as if at the thought of all she must get done before the day was over.

"This is about your brother."

"I don't know where he is. He's hiding, but I have no idea where."

"I won't take a lot of your time."

She shut her eyes for a moment. She was going to let him in, Reves sensed, simply to be able to quit arguing in circles here at the door. She opened her eyes to give him a drugged look, then turned her back, leaving the door open, and went inside and dropped her purse and let her coat slide down her arm to lie on the couch cushions.

He felt sorry for her. She was obviously going through something pretty horrible. He followed her into the room and stood holding his hat, waiting for her to offer a chair. But all she did was to stand looking at him as if he represented some obstacle, some complication, which was just about past her strength or understanding.

He put his hat on a table and sat down.

"I'm sorry to come here now. But there's information we have to have."

She sat down on the couch beside the coat and purse. "About Tommy?"

"We know something of his history, what he did to the railroads before he was sent to prison—"

"Last night," she said in a dry scratchy voice, "he killed our mother. He blew her up. He . . . destroyed her. That has nothing to do with the railroad."

"Something else has been going on," Reves said. He began to tell her about the dynamitings out on the desert. She sat quietly, but he couldn't decide whether she was really listening. She had an anxious, frozen expression of hanging on to some inner thing with both hands.

He said, "Do you know where Palmdale is?"

"Well . . . generally. Out on the desert. North of here."

"Sagebloom?"

She shook her head.

"It's a little place, a depot and a few stores. We think that the man who's been dynamiting these deserted stations may have made Sagebloom his headquarters." He shrugged. "As much as he had a headquarters, anywhere."

"I don't know where it is."

"It's east of Palmdale."

She drew in a deep, tired breath and shut her eyes, holding it.
"No . . . no."

"At first we thought the depredations were the work of juveniles. But last night I had an encounter—call it a fight—with the man who's been . . ."

Now she was really looking at him. "Last night? Then it had nothing to do with Tommy. Don't you understand that Tommy was here in Los Angeles? That he killed my mother?"

"There's some leeway in the time. Not much. What I want to know—before your brother went to prison, was he a good driver?"

"He was reckless. He took terrible chances. That's how he got hurt." She paused and for a moment Reves thought she would just quit. She didn't want to look back at the past. She wanted to sleep, to forget, most of all to get away from Reves and his questions. "He owned a car, a jalopy. Then he bought a motorcycle. He had an accident, he hurt his foot. Somehow he forced himself to wait until he went on the job. After he went to work, he collapsed. He claimed that he had been hurt in the yards. But, you see . . . too many people knew the truth. The claim wouldn't stand up."

"That's when he started playing with dynamite?"

"Oh, no. He'd started that long before. When he was really just a child. Our mother didn't . . . she didn't correct him perhaps as she should have. Mr. . . ." She frowned at him dazedly.

"Reves."

"Mr. Reves, I don't see how I can sit here and talk about my family to you. Some of the memories are more than I can bear."

Reves wanted to get up and leave. Any decent man would have. A decent man wouldn't even have come in to harass this girl. But I'm not a decent man. I'm a railroad cop.

He glanced off into the dinette-kitchen alcove. He moistened his lips. "If you had a cup of coffee handy," he said, "I could use it. I had a rough night and I didn't get much sleep."

He waited for her to explain that *she'd* had a rough night and not much sleep, and had had a mother murdered to boot; but she didn't. She got up off the couch and gave him an apologetic look. "I'm sorry. I'll make some coffee right away."

He watched her go off into the kitchen.

He felt a sudden pity and kinship with this Shelly Collins.

Some of the memories are more than I can bear. . . .

Miss Collins, meet another member of the club.

Chapter Fifteen

Her hand shook, and some of the coffee spilled out into the saucer. She put her hands up to her face, a gesture of dismay out of all proportion to what had happened, as if the spilling of the coffee had torn a hole in her ragged nerve. "Oh. I'm sorry. I'll bring a clean cup and saucer."

"No, it's fine. It's all right."

Before she could grab the cup back, he lifted it to his lips.

"I guess I could stand a cup, too." She went back into the kitchen section. "I forgot to ask. Do you want cream? Sugar?"

"No, thanks."

The coffee was hot but Reves decided it had been made yesterday. She hadn't bothered to make fresh coffee this morning. She'd been sitting here tormented with fright and deciding what had to be

done. She was scared. For herself, now, no doubt. Then Reves remembered something. "You have a sister, too."

All of the color—there hadn't been much—drained from her face. It seemed to Reves that her lips literally turned blue before his eyes. The cup rattled on the saucer and she put it tremblingly aside. "Don't."

Reves said, "Doesn't she live here with you?"

She leaned toward him, and it seemed to Reves he could hear her frightened heart pounding. "Please don't ask about her."

"Didn't the men from L.A.P.D. ask about her?" Reves wondered. What was this all about? The fear and trembling—that was all because of the sister. Of course.

"The only safety she has is in being hidden. If the police, if the newspapers, if *you*—"

"I'm not telling anything to the papers," Reves said.

She went on as if he hadn't said anything. "—if you destroy her safety, reveal where she is, he'll find her. He blamed Mother, and he blamed Stephanie, when he was captured. He said he'd kill them both someday."

Reves remembered how she had looked when he'd first seen her, there in the open doorway. "You were going to move her today," he decided. "But maybe that wouldn't be smart. Maybe she's safe where she is. What kind of place is it? A boarding school?"

Her mouth twisted a little. She pressed her hands together, saying nothing.

"How did he find your mother?"

"I . . . I was careless. I let mail come here to the apartment instead of renting a post office box."

She had thought of this afterward, Reves decided. Now she had convicted herself, in her own mind, of letting her mother be murdered.

"Mrs. Partside sends out receipts for bills paid. She sent one here yesterday. Or . . . rather . . . I guess someone, a bookkeeper or accountant, sent it. There was a return address on the envelope. It must have been in the mailbox all day."

"He moved fast," Reves said, frowning, thinking to himself, *too damned fast to be believable*. "He had to find out what room she was in, he had to place the dynamite on the wall or in the windows."

"My mother was in a tantrum yesterday, and she insisted on sitting beside the window to look out. There was a scaffolding, too, something the termite inspection people had put up. It was all made so easy for him. He had every possible break."

"Yes, he did," Reves agreed, thinking to himself that Tommy Collins was exactly the type to seize advantage of any chance. And now, somehow, this reminded him of the character he'd met in the dark last night, and Pete's surmise, wild as it was, didn't seem so impossible. "Would your brother be crazy enough to run around with the dynamite *in the car*?"

The question didn't surprise her. "Yes, that's what he would do."

"And still drive . . . the way you say he drives?"

"Yes."

"He's crazy."

"It all goes back a long, long way." She didn't explain any further. She didn't want to examine the memories again.

"Well, though," Reves said, "all this still doesn't mean he can find your sister. There aren't any receipts coming from *her* place, are there?"

"They . . . they don't send any."

Suddenly Reves had a hunch the sister was somewhere much safer than just a school. "She might be better just staying where she is."

"I can't think straight. I'm so afraid." The look of strain came harshly into her face, and her eyes moved past Reves to the door and now he knew what she was looking for.

"What about you?" he asked. "Isn't he after you, too?"

"I don't know. I don't think so. Tommy always . . . in some queer way . . . looked up to me, respected me. I remember once, when he was little, he put his arms around me and said, 'I wish you were Mom.' I knew what he meant. Even though Mother never

corrected him, always coddled him and lavished love on him, he searched for something more. For a kind of discipline, for someone to set limits for him and say, 'You can do this but not the other.' I was just a few years older but I guess to Tommy I seemed old and wise. And he needed someone like that."

"How old was he when he began exploding things?"

She wanted to turn away now, not to look at the ugly part of the past, and he was trying to make her look at it and she might refuse. Reves wanted to say, I know how you feel. I know exactly how you feel, because there are things I can't face, either. And for a frightening moment he could see his father standing on the wagon's tailgate, holding the hay fork with the handle down, leaning on it for a moment to rest, the steel tines pointed at his throat. It seemed to Reves that he could feel the heat of that long-ago day and smell the sweet smell of the hay.

I didn't see the skunk come trotting out of the brush. I didn't hold the mules. And they bolted. They hated skunks. I knew it. And because of my carelessness, my father died.

Maybe, Reves thought, looking at Shelly Collins . . . maybe I can tell this woman about it, someday.

"I don't know when Tommy first began playing with explosives. Mother covered up for him for years. It seemed later that the whole town knew about it before I did. He had a vicious reputation by then. He was all bad, they said." Her voice died and Reves caught the echo of regret, of self-blame. She was searching as he was for some way back, some way to change the picture of the past. And he knew exactly how that inner conversation always started—

If I had only . . .

"There's something more I want to talk about," Reves told her. "It's the dummies. Stuffed clothes." He began to explain the things found at the scenes of the explosions, the cache of clothes at Painted Creek. "At first I thought the dummies must be a kind of joke. A gag. Something to scare the first ones who came running. But then I got the idea, they might be an experiment."

She looked down at her hands, locked in her lap, the fingers twisting. A tendon jumped in one wrist. "He must have wanted something or someone . . . alive. He made those things because he was hungry to . . . to . . ." She didn't finish but Reves knew what she meant.

"Well, then, they were a kind of experiment."

"He was pretending," she said in a whisper. "He was pretending they were people."

Farrel hadn't been to the Museum in years. He was surprised, when he had parked his car, to look up at it on the top of its hill and find it exactly as he remembered it. There was the stone path if you wanted to climb, and the trees—the trees were bigger, he noted—and the tall white shaft like a monolith, lifting to face the sun, like something the Indians had carved and left for the white man to puzzle over. The sunlight dappled the white walls and there was a smell of fresh-watered greenery.

He went in through the tunnel that led to the elevator whose shaft went straight up through the hill. In the wall of the tunnel were displays, glass-enclosed, of the Indian life which had once been here. Miniature brown figures, grasshopper-thin, wove blankets, made baskets, ground corn, cooked, danced, painted themselves, and put away their dead. He looked at a few in passing.

The elevator whooshed him upward, all alone, and he stepped out into a tiled octagonal entry. Well, this had changed some.

He inspected some of the artifacts in the new cases. It all looked fresher, strikingly arranged, better lighted.

How long had it been, Farrel asked himself? He'd gotten interested in the Indian stuff after the trip to Arizona. Fifteen years, perhaps. It hadn't been more than two or three years after his wife had disappeared, taking their child with her, and Farrel had still been running here and there in search of them. The Arizona trip hadn't proved out, he recalled. No trace of her, or the baby. But kicking around in the Arizona wasteland, he'd come across an In-

dian Museum. Nothing like this one, just a low adobe structure with two or three rooms and an old, white-haired curator who'd come out from New York for his asthma, or something, and had decided to collect Indian remains from round-about.

That was before the booze, Farrel thought to himself.

You couldn't say that the booze made a dividing line in his life. It just gradually had crept in, like a tide, stilling and drowning all the other things like grief, and frustrated rage against *her*, and interests like the one he'd had for a while in Indian relics.

Farrel licked his lips, and thought about the bottle down in the car. No. Now there was business. Maybe useless business; but business anyway. He went over to the oak door where a new neat sign said OFFICE.

He rapped politely and then looked in.

A blonde girl at a desk was running paper into a typewriter. She looked up in a startled way at Farrel. "Oh, my goodness, but you surprised me! We don't often have anybody as early as this!"

"The elevator was running."

"Yes. I don't mean the Museum isn't opened yet. It's just . . ." She looked out the window at the bright morning light, and then at the watch on her wrist.

"Could I see the man in charge, please?"

"Mr. Dumphy?"

Dumphy . . . yes, that had been the name. Farrel was surprised that Dumphy would still be here. He guessed to himself that museum curators lived a healthier, maybe a more serene life, than railroad cops. Or maybe there was no retirement age.

"Mr. Dumphy is out in the Museum somewhere," the girl told him. "Look for him in the Apaches. Or the Modocs. They're changing things in there."

The names roused a glimmer of memory in Farrel's mind. He remembered when he had found out, to his surprise, that the Apaches hadn't had horses until after the Spaniards arrived and let some loose to roam wild and breed and become herds that the

Apaches could raid. It was after they'd gotten horses that the Apaches became the hellers they were noted for being.

Other scraps skittered through his mind, while he thanked the girl and shut the door. It was funny how you remembered all that stuff, once you were back in a place like this. It was funny, too, how all at once your interest revived, like one of those Arizona desert plants which turn green after the faintest sprinkle of rain; and Farrel thought with sudden regret of the really decent beginning he'd made at a collection of arrowheads. Now where had that gone?

Mr. Dumphy looked about eighty. His hair was completely white and fine as a baby's, and his skin was pink, though mottled now with liver spots. He was standing in the middle of the Apache room talking to a younger man. The younger man wore a blue sport shirt and gray slacks, but Mr. Dumphy was done up formally in black serge.

He gave Farrel a close, curious look; and Farrel wondered if Mr. Dumphy would recognize him. But no sign of recognition came into Mr. Dumphy's pale old eyes.

"Mr. Dumphy? My name's Farrel, I'm with the railroad police," Farrel said, and took out the wallet and displayed the ID and the badge.

"Don't I know you?"

"Well, I used to come around. I was interested in arrowheads and throwing-sticks and that kind of thing." Suitable interest for a cop, Farrel added to himself. Let's stick to weapons.

"I seem to remember you. But not recently, is it?"

"No. It's been a long time."

"Well, it's nice to have you back again. And what can I do for you?"

"I want to talk to you . . . or to somebody . . . about an Indian artist."

Mr. Dumphy smiled a little. "Something old you've found? A relic?"

"No. This is now. And I don't have any of her paintings. I don't even know if she still paints. Perhaps she does. But I think she had a pretty good reputation as an artist."

"And the name?"

"I don't know the name she painted under. I don't imagine it's Deppler. That's her name now."

Mr. Dumphy looked at his assistant. "How about it? Does the name mean anything to you?"

"Not a thing," said the young man. "But that's not my line. How about calling on Princess Brighteyes?"

Mr. Dumphy shook his head. "Now, now. She'll hear you calling her that someday. And it might hurt her feelings." He turned to Farrel. "We have an assistant . . . oh, she's been here almost a year . . . a Navajo girl, very good at display, at arrangement. An excellent artist. And she has a wide acquaintance. Come, we'll find her."

They found the Navajo girl in a big sunny silent storeroom, looking over the stuff in some crates. She was slender, with black hair, and dark eyes in a small quiet face. She smiled at Mr. Dumphy, and then at Farrel. The smile was brief and businesslike.

Mr. Dumphy introduced them. The girl's name sounded something like *Miss Minnewata*, but Farrel wasn't sure of it and simply went on thinking of her as Princess Brighteyes.

Not a bad name for her, either.

"Mr. Farrel wants some information about an artist. I'll let him tell you about her." Mr. Dumphy excused himself and went back to what he and his assistant had been doing.

She dusted her hands by brushing them on her gray denim skirt. Her blouse was red velveteen with a lot of embroidery. She had a lot of beads around her neck. No one could mistake her for anything but an Indian. She had made sure of it.

"Yes, Mr. Farrel?"

"Well . . . I don't know too much. I'm sort of taking a shot in the dark. This woman lives out on the desert, east of Palmdale, a little burg called Sagebloom. She's married to a man named Deppler

and has two sons. She's been married for a long time, because the oldest boy must be sixteen or seventeen. A long time back she was supposed to be an artist, a good one."

"What did she do?"

"Beg pardon?"

"Did she paint, sculpt, do mosaics . . ."

What exactly had the bartender said? "She painted pictures."

"Don't you know her name before she married?"

"No."

She stood quietly, putting a delicate finger to her chin, staring at the sunny windows. She appeared to be thinking. She was quite pretty. Farrel decided that she knew this. "I'm going to call Artie Redbear," she decided. "Wait here. You can sit down on a crate, if you wish."

She went away. Farrel took a look into the crates. There were a lot of different-sized things packed in excelsior, wrapped in burlap, and tagged with blue and yellow tags. There was an old, ancient smell to it all. He had no idea what the objects might be, except that when they were unwrapped they'd be Indian. This was a south-western-Indian museum.

He decided that the girl was responsible for some of the new, fresh-looking displays. She had talent. He wondered if Mr. Dumphy's young male assistant were jealous.

When she came back she said, "I hope you didn't get tired of waiting. Artie was selling a mobile and I had to wait."

"No, that's all right."

"Artie will show you some of Mrs. Deppler's work if you'll go to his studio. He's just out there in Hollywood, it's not too far. He's a TV actor when he isn't painting or collecting. He collects the work of other Indian painters."

"I guess he gets quite a bit of TV work."

"I guess he does. They kill quite a lot of Indians these days," she said, looking dryly into Farrel's eyes.

Chapter Sixteen

Artie Redbear lived in one of the narrow woodsy canyons below Mulholland Drive. Farrel climbed about twenty-five steps through carefully arranged boulders and ocotillo and saguaro cactus. The house was low, small, weathered. The cactus crowded right up to the little porch and looked in through the windows. Farrel decided that Redbear liked cactus.

Artie himself turned out to be a crewcut young college type. Somehow Farrel had expected somebody who resembled the profile on the buffalo nickel. Artie made no effort, as the Princess did, to remind people that he was a real Indian. He was the color of a good poolside tan and his hair was jet. He wore a casual plaid shirt, black jeans, and tennis shoes. He was relaxed, friendly. Farrel decided that Redbear saved his Indian expressions for TV.

Artie had some pictures out, arranged on easels and chairs, perhaps a half-dozen in all as Farrel took them in swiftly. All were desert scenes. Farrel got an impression of grayed distances, violet hills, sharp small accents of green. Well, they looked like the desert, all right. "Are these Mrs. Deppler's?"

"Yes. They're good, aren't they? Of course they tell a story and that's out-of-date now. But the stories aren't obtrusive, really. Look at this." He was pointing at one that Farrel was already looking at. "She named this one *Lost*. Do you catch what I mean about *story*?"

Farrel squatted before the chair and studied the canvas.

Miles of sandy distance were hinted at skillfully in the picture. It seemed to Farrel that he was instantly aware of the silence, the aloneness. No wind blew, nothing stirred. In the middle foreground was a dusty red boxcar, all by itself on a siding where weeds grew up between the rails, and for a moment Farrel thought, it's lost all

right, it's been forgotten out there by some car clerk. Wonder what's in it? And then, bending closer, he saw the half-grown pup down there in the shadows between the wheels. The eyes looked out at the sunny waste with a desperate resignation. All at once Farrel didn't want to look any more.

He stood up.

"She has such good command of *mood*," Artie Redbear was explaining. "The colors aren't just *there*. They're *working* for her. They're a tool I suspect she could get along without, if she wanted to. She could do it all with line. Or even abstractly."

"How recent are these pictures?"

"Nothing's new. Not with her. I just wonder how she could quit like that. She could be working, of course, and not showing anything. But I don't believe it."

"Did you ever meet her?"

"A couple of times."

"Here in L.A.?"

"At art shows."

"Do you know anything about her? Why she quit painting, for instance?"

"Oh, everybody knows that," Redbear said, as if surprised at Farrel's ignorance. "She married the most horrible man she could have picked, if she meant to go on painting, that is. She didn't just marry a clod. She married a maniac."

The bartender's words . . . *Old man Deppler . . . he's goofy . . .*

Artie Redbear seemed to squint regretfully at something out in the crowding cactus beyond the windows. "He beats her, the gossip is. And he never lets her forget what she is."

"What she is?" Farrel echoed, not understanding.

"A squaw."

Farrel grunted. The room was very quiet. Farrel took out a pack of cigarettes and offered them first to Redbear, who shook his head. Farrel lit a cigarette and drew the smoke down into his lungs. He wanted a drink.

"She isn't the only one I've seen fall apart," Redbear said. "And she had the advantage of not growing up on a reservation. Her people had money, oil money. Oh, I don't mean I've seen all these people come to grief with my own eyes, personally. Hell, I was just a kid when she must have married Deppler. Maybe I was eight or nine years old. Maybe younger. But I see *my* people, people with talent, and they come here to buck . . . whatever is here that you have to buck— And I can't say why it happens. I don't know why."

The room got very quiet again.

"It doesn't just happen to people with talent," Farrel said. "It happens to all kinds. All colors, all shapes. For one reason or another. Sometimes they've fallen apart inside and it hardly shows. And they keep right on, going through the motions."

"It's a damned funny world," said Artie Redbear.

"It sure is."

"Did you meet Mrs. Deppler?"

"I saw her. Not for long. She looked pretty sure of herself to me. Adjusted, I guess the word is. She held her head up."

"That's just a habit with us," Redbear assured him.

"She has a couple of kids, boys. Teen-age. Tough."

"I don't know anything about that."

"Are these pictures of hers for sale?"

"No."

"Well, thanks for letting me look at them."

"Oh, sure, don't mention it. Look, don't get any wrong ideas about anything I said. I'm not setting myself up as some kind of damned judge, or anything."

"I know that."

Redbear nodded slowly.

When Farrel got back to the car he took out the pint bottle of whisky and looked at it; but there was still a lot of driving to do, and so he decided to wait a while. He put the bottle back out of sight under the front seat.

. . . they keep right on, going through the motions . . .

Farrel rubbed a hand across his face, feeling the whiskers. He started the motor then, and put the car into gear.

Something was going on in the infirmary. Nun after nun had been called away, had disappeared. Stephanie, rubbing doorknobs, kept a sharp eye on all the hall traffic. Perhaps Sister Ruth Edward was bad again. Sister Ruth Edward was terribly old—a hundred, maybe—and they must all be in there praying beside her bed.

Father O'Connor would be coming to give the last rites of the Church.

So where was Sister Bernard?

Suppose things got all fouled up and she couldn't find Sister Bernard anywhere? Suppose all the planning, the excitement—she was *dying* with excitement!—the watching and waiting, had been for nothing?

Tomorrow, then . . .

Such anguish seized Stephanie, such sick disappointment, nausea, with a slow squeezing and pressing around her heart, that she almost cried out, right there in the silent corridor!

I can't wait until tomorrow!

I won't endure it.

Tomorrow was a hundred years away. Tomorrow was in another eon!

I can't wait. . . .

Today is now. Today is freedom, even for just a little while. Today is the sun shining on the outdoors, on trees, on sidewalks, on stores, on people, on houses, on the beaches, on the wide wide ocean, on *me*.

Or . . . it would have been, on *me*.

No. I won't wait!

"I'll run out the front door and let them catch me trying to climb the gate," Stephanie whispered to her reflection in the door-knob. "Then they'll send me away. Forever. To be free."

Shelly will cry. . . .

Let her cry. Let her just come here and live, the way I have to. I haven't done a thing. I didn't write rubber checks like Erma. I didn't try to drown my baby brother in the bathtub like Willima. I didn't have three . . . boy friends . . . like Carla. I didn't even try to steal something . . . like everybody else, practically!

I haven't done a single bad . . .

Sister Bernard had come up behind her. The large white shape, the kindly face, the gleam of rosary and keys . . . Stephanie found that she'd been seeing the reflection in the brass doorknob for a while. For how long?

She turned quickly in fright.

But Sister Bernard was standing there with her eyes shut, her lips moving.

She's praying for Sister Ruth Edward. . . .

Stephanie remained on her knees, staring.

After a while Sister opened her eyes and looked directly at Stephanie. Stephanie fumbled with the brass paste and the cleaning rag, not knowing what to say. Sister then bent forward and took Stephanie's face between her hands. Her palms felt smooth and cool. "Life is so short, little Stephanie. Will you remember that?"

"Yes, Sister."

"Even the longest life is short."

"Yes, Sister." She added softly, "Who is sick, Sister?"

"Our Sister Ruth Edward is about to . . ." Sister Bernard turned away, not finishing, and Stephanie realized with surprise that she was crying. Stephanie had never seen one of the nuns cry. They were supposed to be—what was the word?—*detached*. Detached from the world and from everything in it, including people. Sister Bernard must be breaking some rule or other, Stephanie worried.

"You must say a prayer for Sister," said the nun, turning back to Stephanie.

What good would a prayer of mine . . . Stephanie started to blurt it out and then remembered. Every prayer had its worth. If Sister Bernard wanted a prayer from such as she—disobedient, conspiring—then she'd give it. She rose from the squatting position,

leaving the paste and rags lie, and went with Sister Bernard to a bench in an alcove.

While Sister Bernard prayed, and Stephanie made responses, time seemed to stand still. It was very quiet in this corridor. Now and then someone passed in the distance, a nun with bowed head or one of the girls. Everyone seemed tiptoeing, waiting for a mysterious visitor.

Waiting for Death.

Stephanie pictured Death as sort of bony, with big eyes.

I wouldn't want to die in here, she thought desperately. Not without seeing the outside world again. She wondered about the old, old nun and how she felt about it. Well, Sister Ruth Edward had been inside so long, she'd probably forgotten all about the world.

Sister Bernard was taking out one of the big plain-white handkerchiefs they all carried stuffed in their sleeves. She wiped her eyes. "Sister Ruth Edward was my novice mistress. A long time ago."

This seemed less and less detached to Stephanie, but it made Sister Bernard seem very human.

"I'm sorry," Stephanie whispered, touching the nun's hand.

"The years rush by so swiftly. It seems scarcely begun. And then it's done."

Stephanie's heart thumped. I don't want to die. Not before I get out . . . even for a day . . . she prayed. Fright seemed to chill the air around her. Something could happen. She could have a kind of fit and drop dead. Her heart might stop. It didn't usually in people her age, but it could.

Sister Bernard rose from the bench. She touched Stephanie's shoulder with her usual kindness. "Thank you, Stephanie."

"You're welcome, Sister."

With a vague nod Sister moved away, down the hall to the cross corridor where others passed occasionally.

On the bench where she had sat lay the black leather folder with

her keys. The folder was shut and snapped but the keys were out. They lay there, spread in a little semicircle, shiny-bright.

Stephanie sat scarcely daring to breathe.

Sister Bernard would miss her keys and come back. Right away, probably. She'd remember sitting here with Stephanie, she'd know that this must be the spot she'd dropped them.

It's too early, Stephanie thought in despair. It's long, long before lunchtime. And then another thought came: *perhaps there won't be another chance all day.* . . .

She shook herself as if to break free of some spell, hurried back to the paste and cleaning rag, and repolished the doorknob.

Then she found herself looking over her shoulder.

Instead of just lying there on the end of the bench, the keys could have fallen behind it. Yes, just as well. She ran back to the bench and lifted the leather folder and dropped it down against the wall. It was hidden now.

She went to the main corridor and worked there. Sister Helena came by, and stopped briefly to whisper a word of encouragement. "We ordered the lipstick this morning and I know Sister Superior will give permission to wear it for visitors!"

That was Sister Helena for you. She always knew when things were getting kind of tight and wretched.

"My sister said she'd bring one."

"Then you'll have two!"

"I'll give you one, Sister."

Sister opened her eyes wide and clapped her hand over her mouth in pretended shock. Then she bent close again and her tone and her face were serious. "Pray for Sister Ruth Edward."

"Yes, Sister."

A final pat on the shoulder and she went on, the whisper of footsteps and the click of rosary beads fading to silence.

Stephanie thought, now if everyone could be like Sister Helena. . . .

Even with one of the nuns dying and the whole convent praying for her, Sister hadn't forgotten what mattered to some people.

She had said they'd ordered a lipstick. Stephanie knew exactly how it must have been listed for the extern sister:

1 lipstick

They had no idea of course of the delicious range of colors, the arrays of red and pinks and orange-glow and lavenders . . .

1 lipstick.

Stephanie stood up. She tucked the brass paste and the cleaning cloth behind a vase of flowers in a niche. She hurried back to the bench and retrieved Sister Bernard's keys.

The leather felt cold and clammy against her palm.

She returned to the main corridor, walked about twenty feet down toward the main entrance. Polished oak gleamed in the distance, the unlocked front door that scared her just to look at it. Stephanie approached a side corridor and turned right.

No one was anywhere near.

The money . . .

She didn't have Erma's money, but her own small savings were pinned in a handkerchief inside her blouse.

She fitted the key. The door moved heavily on its big hinges. It swung in and left an open space and Stephanie found herself looking at the street.

There was a block of houses directly across, and beyond the next corner was a big shopping center.

She stepped out, shutting the door behind her. The click of the lock sounded loud in the stillness.

A couple of cars went by.

She remembered suddenly that once Sister Helena had told her that when the convent had been built here, it had been out in the country. Now the neighborhood, even to her inexperienced eyes, looked long-built-up, even rather old.

She went down to the end of the block, walking in tree-shadow. The convent wall was tall and white and unbroken on her left.

There were footsteps behind her; and a sudden worry caused

her to look back. *They'd already found out that she was gone. . . .*

But no, this was just a man.

He was coming closer, his eyes fixed on her face.

Now what on earth could he want?

Chapter Seventeen

"Even if I don't take Stephanie away," Shelly told Reves, "I must go and talk to the Sisters. And to her. She's young and it will be hard for her to understand the danger."

"That sounds like a good idea," Reves agreed. "How about letting me drive you there? It might help if I talked to her, too."

She gave him a half-weary, reserved look and he thought that she was going to say, I've told you all I can about Tommy and I intend to keep my sister's whereabouts a secret as long as I can, and so why don't you leave me alone? He was prepared to argue, but instead, after a moment, she nodded. "All right. Perhaps if I bring an officer along Stephanie may be impressed enough to use some caution."

"Before we go, could I use the phone?"

"Surely."

He called the office. Pete told him that the conference with the L.A.P.D. detectives was set for one o'clock in Ryerson's office.

"I'll be there. Where's Farrel?"

"Went back out to Sagebloom."

"Anything new there?"

"Some idea he's got," Pete said.

They went on out to the porch and Shelly Collins locked her door. Then she turned to face the yard and again he saw the searching, worrying look. "Your brother came here and found the receipt in your mailbox," Reves said. "Do you think he got inside the apartment?"

"Yes, I think he did," she answered, without explaining why she believed it.

"Is there anything in the apartment that would give a clue as to where your sister is?"

"Nothing at all."

"How many people in your home town knew that you'd come to Los Angeles?"

She hesitated on the lowest step. "Just one. An old neighbor I knew I could trust . . . or at least that I . . ." Suddenly she shook her head. "No, he wouldn't have told anyone. Not intentionally."

"Perhaps not intentionally," Reves said, and she gave him the weary look again.

They didn't talk much on the way to where Stephanie was. Shelly Collins gave directions, and Reves made a few comments on the L.A. traffic. But he was aware of her over there on the seat beside him all the way. He didn't try to deny to himself his interest in her. Here was a woman, he felt, who—when she wasn't afraid or grieving or in shock—was a warm and humanly lovable person. He had begun to get some hunches about those memories she didn't want to look at. The mother had made a pet of Tommy; and to Reves this suggested that she had not made pets of the girls. For the girls she had probably had plans, commercial plans. That was usually the way with parents who gave all their love to one. The rest of the kids were regarded as cash crops.

Finally Shelly said, referring back to their talk on the stairs: "I think Mother might have let a couple of her friends know where we were headed when she left home."

Trying to defend the old neighbor. "Even the best of us let things slip," Reves said. "Even when we know better."

The nun who admitted them at the front gate of the convent seemed to Reves to be distracted. There was a faraway look in her eyes and her smile was brief. She took them in through a big entry to a parlor, whispered an excuse and left them there. The place was very quiet. Reves had an impression of thick walls and of distances.

The wait was much longer than he would have expected. As the minutes passed he began to have a hunch that something was wrong.

He rose as an older nun came in. She was tall, with angular features and a look of command. He was thinking, she must be the one in charge here, and then he heard Shelly Collins address her as Sister Superior.

The Sister nodded gravely to Reves as Shelly introduced him.

"Sit down, please."

"Is . . . is Stephanie busy right now?"

The nun looked at Shelly with a speculative glance in which Reves thought was a touch of pity. "It's been no secret that Stephanie has been very dissatisfied here with us. She feels that being here is a punishment, and that she had done nothing to deserve it."

"Sister, she's so young and—"

The Sister held up her hand. "That's beside the point now. Stephanie is gone. She isn't in the convent anywhere. It seems she must have used Sister Bernard's keys to let herself out. She took advantage of an unfortunate situation. One of our Sisters is at the point of death."

All color had left Shelly Collins' face. "No. No."

"Did anyone see Stephanie leave?" Reves asked.

"No. She had confided in another girl, and this girl has admitted what she told her. No one knew she was gone until you came and asked for her. There is a certain amount of confusion today. We aren't as alert as usual."

"Sister, I have to know where she is! Right now!"

"She will be dismissed."

Shelly Collins was standing. She looked at Reves wide-eyed as if expecting help, and Reves said to the nun: "I'd better use your telephone right away."

Pete lifted the phone when it rang.

"Special Agent's office."

For a minute there was silence.

"My name's Collins."

"Yes, sir." Pete had his eyes on a report which concerned juvenile depredations in one of the yards. Figures had to be tabulated as to method of entry, time of day or night, and other factors, so that some form of systematic protection could be evolved. The juvenile problem in that particular area was getting out of hand.

"Thomas Collins."

Something cold seemed to wash over Pete's skin. He dropped the pencil he'd been holding.

"Maybe my name doesn't mean anything to you people, yet."

I've got to stall this guy. I need somebody on another extension. Pete looked around desperately, but for the moment he was alone in the office. Ryerson's glassed-in sanctum was lightless and deserted.

"What should it mean, Mr. Collins?"

"I've got some plans for your railroad. Interested?"

"Well, maybe you'd better explain what the plans are." Pete tried to keep any hint of recognition or of alarm out of his voice.

Why didn't somebody come in?

If he himself should miss something or should forget an important detail, a second listener could supply it. Pete watched the door, biting his lip.

"You know . . . there's been a little trouble out on the desert. Maybe it's not in your division, maybe nobody's even told you about it. A few old stations were blown up. Blown to bits."

"Let's see." Pete tried to drag it out as if he were thinking. "Yes, I guess there has been some destruction like that." His eyes fell on the report he'd been working on. "Kid stuff. Juveniles."

"No, not juveniles," said the other promptly. "Me. Tommy Collins, as I used to be known as."

Boasting now, Pete thought.

Tough Tommy Collins. He wanted his name and his fame remembered.

"Guess I just don't place you, buddy."

"I'm not your buddy and as I said, I've got plans for your railroad."

With a few sticks of dynamite I can undo about a quarter million dollars' worth of work for the railroad. Know what I mean?"

"I guess I don't."

"You're building a big new road, a cutoff from the east, a way to get the trains north without switching in the L.A. yards."

"Yes."

"Lots of loose fill and raw cuts out there. Nothing much holding the stuff in place, yet. Let's just say it would roll awfully easy."

Pete couldn't think of anything to say. His mouth felt dry.

"I can think of three spots right now where a few sticks could start an earthquake. Bury the bulldozers and the engineers right along with the new right of way."

"You're bluffing."

"You know better."

"So what? Is this what you're going to do?"

Tommy Collins' voice got lower and quieter, confidential. "I asked a railroad for money once before. All I got was trouble. It wasn't even very much money, just a few thousand for being disabled in the freight yards. And for that they stuck me in jail."

Pete wanted to ask, wasn't there more to it than that? Weren't there a few explosions involved? But he kept still.

"Now I don't want little dough. I want big dough. I want one hundred thousand dollars in used bills."

"I just don't happen to have that much on hand right now."

"Funny guy, huh? You aren't the boss there or you wouldn't be joking. Not with me."

"I guess I wouldn't," Pete admitted. "But a hundred thousand is pretty steep. How about fifty?"

"A hundred thousand isn't steep when you compare it to the lives of a bunch of people on a passenger train. Or a tunnel you've got to use to get over the grade to Tehachapi. Or . . . like I said . . . all that new fill and cut out east of Palmdale."

Pete's breath went out in a sigh. No one had come in. He had to carry this insane bargaining to its conclusion. "How can we pay it to you? You coming in for it?"

"You get funny just one more time," Collins said coolly, "and I'll do a little demonstrating before I call back. I'll move dirt, plenty of it. I've got somebody to bury, anyhow."

"Somebody to . . ."

"Not your affair. Private. I'll phone you tomorrow about how I want the money delivered. You have today to get it together. Don't tell me the railroad doesn't have it. I want it put in a couple of big, strong suitcases. I don't know how much room a hundred thousand takes, but a couple of big old suitcases ought to do it."

"And you'll call back," Pete echoed mechanically. His head hurt.

"You'll hear from me, all right. Buddy."

The phone went dead and after a moment Pete put his own phone down. He felt as if he had been buffeted by a high wind, or had been shoved around by playful gorillas. It was hard to think. His heart was thumping. But instinctively he turned to the typewriter and began to pound out his account of the interview just ended.

What was hard to put into typescript was the tone of Tommy Collins' voice.

Tommy Collins hadn't been fooling or funning around. He hadn't sounded serious, on the other hand, nor mean nor dangerous nor vicious. What Pete hadn't liked about Tommy Collins was his lighthearted carelessness. He made blowing up things and people sound like popping creampuffs.

That's what made Pete want to shiver.

The phone rang again and Pete turned from the typewriter to stare at it. Then he picked it up and put it to his ear, expecting somehow that this would be Collins back again.

But it was Reves, speaking quickly. "Pete. I've already talked to L.A.P.D., so they know about this. The kid sister has disappeared. She sneaked out of this place, where her sister had put her. This morning. It's a school for delinquent girls, mostly, I guess, run by nuns—a convent. No telling where she went."

"Maybe her brother has her."

"No proof of that. She's been unhappy here and planning to get out. And Shelly Collins is sure her brother wouldn't know where to find her."

"A convent school? Even one for delinquent girls . . . I'll bet he didn't miss a bet. I'll bet he called Catholic girls' schools, all kinds, until he found out where she was."

Reves was silent for a moment. "Yes, it's possible. I'll check again. This place is kind of disorganized on account of something else . . . a nun about to die. But look—just in case by some freak of chance he did get his hands on her—call the Sheriff's office in Palmdale. Collins won't keep the kid in L.A. He'll take her out of town. Ask the Sheriff's patrol cars in the neighborhood of Sagebloom to be on the lookout for a fast driver. A car with a man and a young girl."

Pete was scribbling on a pad of paper. "Will do."

"And tell them to be careful if they find him. He's carrying the dynamite with him, is my guess."

"Don't hang up yet," Pete put in. "Collins just called here, I just got through talking to him."

"What?"

"He wants a hundred thousand dollars from the railroad." When Reves made an exclamation, Pete added, "If he doesn't get it, he'll start things going up. Mostly the new cuts and fills out east of Palmdale."

Reves' silence seemed stunned, disbelieving. "He wants money. He isn't after the kid, then."

"No, wait a minute. He said he had somebody to bury, anyhow. A private thing, he added."

"Somebody to bury?" After a long moment Reves added, "She could already be dead."

All Pete could think was, yes, she could; and he didn't want to say that.

"Pete, after you've finished talking to the Sheriff's office, will you go over that division map? I'm coming in pretty soon, I'd like a list of every odd spur, every abandoned station or even a shed. We haven't got a lot of time."

"Only until he calls tomorrow."

"If we can just have a break. Even a little one."

Pete thought, if we were just psychic, if we could just look at the map and find the spot he's going to hit.

"He seems to know so damned much about that country out there," Reves complained. "I'll see you later, Pete."

When Reves had hung up, Pete sat looking thoughtfully at the stuff on the top of his desk. What Reves had just said was running through his mind. It was damned funny, he agreed to himself, that a fleeing convict could come out here from the Middle West and right away seem to acquire all the know-how of an old desert rat. You almost had to live around places like Sagebloom—live there for years—to make your way unerringly through the lost distances. The country was so big, and its silent desolateness was so dangerous.

He went into Ryerson's sanctum and turned on the lights and looked at the division map on the wall.

To Pete's studying eyes the desert country beyond the mountains that lay northeast of the city looked like an exposed flank. The lines that represented track were stretched-out, spidery, far apart. There weren't many spurs, actually. Nor stations, either. He got a pencil and the paper pad and began to make notes.

He felt a sense of futility even as he jotted it down. What Collins had said over the phone could be a blind, a device to conceal his real plans. He could change his base of operations. He had the whole world to pick from. He could go east to Arizona, or farther, north to San Francisco and the network of rail around the bay area. He could even run down to San Pedro harbor without any trouble and ruin a whole complex of installations down there.

He could send a passenger train to its death anywhere.

Pete thought then, one thing would hamper him a little. The girl. It would seem he'd have to rid himself of her right away.

Pete's gaze on the division map grew blank as he tried to imagine just what it would be like to be young and afraid and to be in the possession of a madman like Thomas Collins.

Chapter Eighteen

Reves and Shelly Collins left the enormous iron gateway and walked to the corner. Shelly looked down the street to the right where the high wall and the old trees made a leaf-shadowed passage. "She was here just a short time ago. And now Tommy must have her. How did he get her to go with him?" She began to walk, looking from side to side. Reves knew how desperately she was hoping to find some sign, some clue.

Reves himself looked for the keys that the nuns had told them Stephanie had taken with her.

"How old was she when your brother went to prison?"

"Thirteen." She was glancing closely at each tree as they passed, as if Stephanie might be hiding there.

"How much do you think she remembers?"

"I don't know. A year is forever at that age. Memories fade. There's so much that is new to see and feel."

Reves thought to himself, Shelly Collins had insight and compassion. She had truly put herself into the place of her young sister and had tried to understand her viewpoint.

"It was a mistake to put Stephanie here," she went on bitterly. "It was too confining. As for how much she might remember, there's this, too, what my mother might have told her. To Mother, the whole business about Tommy was turned inside out. She saw the picture from the other side." Shelly was looking on down the walk. They were opposite a deeply-set-in doorway of dark wood. "Perhaps when Stephanie got out, she went the other way."

Reves turned to glance back. "It's more likely that she'd head for the boulevard, the shopping center. Probably she meant to catch a bus downtown."

There were tears in Shelly's desperate eyes. "And come to me?"

"I don't think so. Remember what she did. She took the keys with her. She was going to let herself back in again. She just wanted a little time out to be free."

"Perhaps that man who called the convent wasn't really—"

"He was your brother."

"It couldn't have been a police officer, trying to get hold of Steph to break the news about Mother—"

"They don't work that way," Reves told her. "That was a fishing expedition. He got what he wanted when he found out your sister was here."

"Why . . . why . . ." she cried, "did it have to happen like this? Why was it that on the very day Stephanie walked out—" She couldn't go on. She went over to the white wall and leaned on the painted plaster, sheltering her face between her hands, and for a lonely moment Reves wished that he knew her well enough so that he wouldn't just have to stand there. Her body shook inside the light coat. "Everything happened *his* way."

"He would have gotten to her somehow. He's had all the breaks, yes, but those breaks had their beginnings in the nature of the people you were trying to protect. You did the best you could. I think you did better than most."

She pushed herself from the wall. She took a handkerchief from her purse and wiped away the tears. "I was tempted to take it out on you. I was going to say . . . if I hadn't waited this morning to talk to you—but I won't say it. I won't even allow myself to think it. Because, as you put it, he'd have reached her somehow. In spite of me."

Reves nodded. It was quiet here by the white wall, under the leaf-dapple, though traffic hummed on the boulevard in the distance. She put a hand on his sleeve, looking up, and for a moment there was a trace of smile.

Reves put his hand over hers. They began to move toward the parked car. "I have to go back downtown," Reves said. "There's a meeting set up for this afternoon between us and the L.A.P.D. men."

If I can get out of it, I'm going up to Palmdale right away. I wonder if I might call you when I get back? It could be pretty late."

"Come by if you can."

"You're going home now?"

"Yes. I keep thinking, there is a chance that Tommy will bring Stephanie to me. Surely he wouldn't . . . am I being very foolish?"

"Just keep hoping."

"What do you expect to find in Palmdale?"

"Well, I should have said, the desert. I want to look around."

"You think he's already taken her out there?"

"Maybe."

She stumbled slightly. "He wouldn't hurt her."

"I can't see how he figures she had anything to do with bringing the police down on him."

She waited while Reves opened the car door. "She had nothing to do with that."

For a moment there was a bitter, faraway look in her eyes and Reves knew that her brother's capture was one of the horrible memories she didn't want to face.

When they reached Ribbonwood Drive, Reves asked, "Do you mind if I come up and make sure your place is empty?"

"I don't mind."

The place was empty, all right. Reves looked through the front room, the kitchen-dinette and the hall, and waited while Shelly checked the bedroom and closets.

"No one's here," she said, waiting for Reves to go.

"You're not afraid?"

"I wish it were I he had, not Stephanie."

Reves was at the door.

"Will you call me if there is any news—?"

Reves nodded. "I'll call anyway, tonight."

Farrel pulled to the curb before the bar, killed the motor and set the brake and got out. The day was beginning to warm up. There was the desert smell, something you never got in the downtown

canyons . . . dusty and dry and yet clean, like old earth scoured to ash by the sun, and under it a hint of sage, a reluctant fragrance. Away off in the distance, on the horizon, was a lump of cloud, but overhead the sky was brassy with light. He went in, and the bar seemed cool and dim and somehow quite artificial.

He didn't see the bartender. A woman was working near the far end of the counter, and when he took a second glance he saw that it was Mrs. Deppler.

He went back there, but she didn't look up. She was cutting some vegetables, using a big French knife on a chopping block.

"Mrs. Deppler?"

"What do *you* want?"

"My name is Farrel and I'm with the railroad police." According to regulations, this was when you offered the ID but she wasn't going to look at it anyway. Farrel slid onto a stool and put his elbows on the bar. "I'd like to talk to you for a minute."

Her lips compressed in her dark face. "There's no law that you can't talk. But there's no law, either, that I have to answer."

She was wearing a blue dress, cotton, clean and plain. Her black hair was pulled back, looped in a knot on her neck. Farrel thought to himself that she looked completely Indian. She took a carrot off a pile on the counter and put it on the block and neatly severed its top. She just cut off my head, Farrel thought. That carrot was me. Baby, you missed your times by about a hundred years. Too bad you weren't a squaw way back then. You'd have been something. Too bad you've just got to take it out on a carrot.

"I don't want to make you sore, Mrs. Deppler. I don't even want to talk about your kids, just yet. I want to talk about a painting I saw in Artie Redbear's place in Hollywood."

For just a moment the blade paused in its chopping.

"I liked that picture in a way. I can't forget it and I wish I could, I mean I wish I could forget about the pup under the boxcar. You really didn't have to put the pup in that picture. The boxcar was lost enough, lonesome enough, to fit the title of the picture. You

made the desert real. The desert was big and there was no wind blowing. There was that kind of silence you feel sometimes."

She lifted her eyes for a moment; they were dark and glowing and to Farrel's astonishment they were scared, too.

"I would have liked to buy that picture . . . that is, providing I could have afforded it . . . but Artie didn't give me a chance. He said none of your paintings was for sale."

There was a big enamel pot by her elbow. She scraped up the carrot and dumped it into the pot, onto what looked like chopped onions and potatoes and other stuff, a soup mix. She turned her head to look into the pot and the light from the front door shone on her and Farrel saw a big reddened bruise up near her hairline. Her right jaw was puffed and he saw where her lip had been cut.

"Do you have any of your pictures at home? You wouldn't have another one of that pup under the boxcar, would you?"

She picked up a turnip and examined it critically and began to peel it. There was a yawning noise from beyond a door at the rear, and the bartender came out stretching himself. He saw Farrel and nodded.

"You will not come to my house," she said under her breath.

"I'm going to have to."

"I have no paintings, nothing."

"You don't paint anything any more?"

"No. Nothing. Nothing."

The word *nothing* had an empty dead sound, the way she said it. It made Farrel think of unpainted shacks and rusting tin cans and hot days all alike. "Those kids of yours know something about the dynamitings we've had around here."

"No." She shook her head, still scared, but emphatic too. "They don't know anything. They wouldn't do things like that."

"Let me talk to them."

The bartender came down closer to Farrel and yawned again and then said, "What'll it be?"

"Bourbon. I'll chase it with branch."

The bartender took a sly look at Mrs. Deppler as he went past.

Then he looked at Farrel and winked. Farrel knew that the bartender was amused that old man Deppler had beaten her, and now must be lying drunk at home, and that she'd come to work, most likely to get away from him. It could be kind of funny, he supposed, if you just thought of her as a squaw married to a white man, and living the best life her husband allowed her. It was an old cliché that white men who married squaws went to hell right away. The plot was a classic. Farrel could even remember silent movies from his childhood, Dustin Farnum or somebody, sitting drunk in a saloon while the other men sneered at him from the bar, the squaw either crouched in a corner of the saloon or peeping in at the door, he couldn't recall which. At the time Farrel had thought that the girl was really an Indian but he realized now that it had been Lila Lee or somebody like that.

The thing here wasn't a bit funny if you thought of Mrs. Deppler as an artist, someone with an excellent talent, who had—God knew why—decided to degrade herself by marrying a maniac.

Two different views.

Maybe the truth was a little of both, Farrel wondered, savoring the whisky. Maybe she was a squaw *and* an artist. It was a kind of unusual combination, but possible. Maybe she was like that Indian on the horse—what was the name of the damned statue? *The End of the Trail*?—and she was committing a kind of race suicide, minor scale, by humbling herself with Deppler.

I can go further than that, Farrel told himself. I can get psychological about it. She was wealthy and educated and talented, and contented, maybe even proud, and then she somehow got a good look at the way the others lived, visited the reservation to see relatives or something, and she found her people dragging around the hogans, ragged, pot-bellied from starvation, blind and crippled from disease, and she suddenly got a guilt complex.

It could be. He didn't believe the fantasy, but it was possible.

He glanced at Mrs. Deppler. She was holding the knife. She answered his glance with a thoughtful look of her own.

"I have to talk to your sons," he said softly.

"Don't go to the house," she hissed at him.

"Where, then?"

"Later, I'll . . . I'll fix it up."

Somebody came into the front of the place. Farrel heard steps, and then someone came down the bar and said, "Your name Farrel?"

He turned. Here was a shirtsleeved man in a green eyeshade and Farrel knew instantly he'd come across the street from the freight depot.

"That's right."

"You're wanted on the phone."

Farrel left his drink, nodded to the bartender to let him know he'd be back, following the other man out into the sunlight.

"How did you know where to look for me?" Farrel knew the answer. He really couldn't figure out why he was asking.

"They said, look around for the company car."

"In front of a bar?"

"Just look around, that's all."

The permanence, the inexorableness of Rule G hung in the air between them. Rule G said you didn't drink and work for the railroad. Rule G prevented things like train collisions, and wrongly thrown switches, and getting your legs cut off under moving wheels, and waking up in a boxcar headed for Chicago.

The back of the freight clerk's neck informed Farrel that *he* didn't drink on the job. Wouldn't think of it.

Farrel leaned against the old, varnished counter and spoke into the phone. "Farrel here."

Pete said, "Ryerson's sending two more cars up there. This is going to have to move fast. This Tommy Collins character wants one hundred grand from the railroad or he'll start blasting . . . Wait a minute, there's a lot you need to know about this character." Pete gave Farrel a swift sketch of the new developments. Farrel felt like shaking his head to clear his thoughts. This was all a totally new tangent. "He's threatening to move dirt in some of the new cuts out

past Red Canyon. He'll call in tomorrow, tell us how to get the money to him. Ryerson has a hunch the money wouldn't stop him, though. He wants to find him now. He's got his kid sister with him—if she's still alive."

"You've alerted the Sheriff's office in Palmdale?"

"We did that a half-hour ago. Now, Ryerson wants you to do this. Get on the next east-bound freight and study all the spurs. Get off at"—Farrel knew that Pete was looking at a map, or checking notes—"at Lava Springs and head back. What Ryerson wants you to look for, is any sign of a car having turned off by one of the spurs. They don't all have parallel roads. Look for fresh tracks, broken brush—"

"I know what to look for."

"Some of these old mines have been abandoned so long, we don't know what's there. But *he* knows. Somehow. It's funny that he could get out of prison like that, and head here . . . Well, you stop the next freight going east."

"Okay, Pete."

Farrel went back to the bar, finished the drink. Mrs. Deppler wasn't in sight. The bartender was reading the morning paper. The big kettle was simmering on a gas plate.

"You staying for lunch?"

"I'm afraid not."

"You know, it's funny, I really didn't think she'd be here today. The old man must really be on a tear. A bad one."

"How often does he have these spells?"

"No telling. I guess she doesn't know, doesn't have any warning. Maybe he doesn't even have a warning. All at once—" The bartender removed one hand from the paper to snap his fingers.

"Where's she gone now? Home?"

"Back to check up on the kids. She won't go in. They won't be inside, they'll be sitting in the car. Reading comic books and smoking stolen cigarettes."

Farrel nodded and headed for the door. "I'll see you later."

"Yeah. Along around dinnertime," the bartender suggested.

Chapter Nineteen

Shelly Collins opened the door of the apartment and stood looking down into the greenery of the rear yard. The sun was almost directly overhead, and cast pools of shadow under the big trees. A faint wind rustled the leaves. A bird chirped twice.

She glanced at her watch. Time had gone by with agonizing slowness, but it had passed. Now it was nearly noon. She had a feeling of isolation, of being in a backwater, passed by, of waiting for something which would never happen.

Tommy wouldn't come here. He'd never had any intention of bringing Stephanie. They were far away by now. She tried to remember the name of the town Reves had mentioned. He had said it was northeast of Los Angeles, out on the desert, the other side of the mountains that hemmed in the coastal basin. Sagebloom. Yes, that had been it.

She went inside and walked through the apartment, unable to sit still, her eyes burning with tiredness. She had to wait here. She had to wait in case Tommy wanted to drop Stephanie off. Perhaps he would simply scold Stephanie. He would threaten her with what had happened to Mother, but he couldn't really . . . No. No.

She thought then, I don't know him any more. The boy, the little brother I once knew, is gone. There's no yearning for decency, no kindness, no love at all. There's just . . . I don't know what there is now, I don't know what it could be like to be Tommy and to feel the way he does.

Perhaps it's like being lost in a fog.

Perhaps faces pass by, blurred, and words are spoken, and sometimes someone touches you, but none of it is real. It's a long, lost,

confused nightmare and so you don't mind doing things like killing them, these dream-things. You blow them up. The explosions sound real, an enormous noise that seems to have reality, and this is good.

Shelly sat down on the couch and held her head in her hands.

She prayed then, praying that Stephanie was all right.

Stephanie would be terribly frightened once she knew what Tommy intended to do with her. She would plead with Tommy, she would beg for her life, and in Tommy's foggy nightmare the words might distract him for a moment. He might listen.

All at once Shelly knew that she couldn't wait here any longer.

She hurried into the kitchen, and rummaged in a drawer where she kept cookbooks and receipts and a few stray maps. She found a map of California and spread it on the sinkboard. Her finger traced the route north, out of Los Angeles. Yes, here was Palmdale. Where was Sagebloom?

She found herself looking at the great empty expanse of map. There were scarcely any towns. Here and there was a name of a place and under it, in parentheses, was the word *ruins*.

For some reason the emptiness was the most frightening of all.

Sagebloom was a speck, a dot.

She folded the map hurriedly and ran to the bedroom for her purse. Her heart was pounding. She felt dizzy with excitement, with dread and hope. She checked her purse for her car keys and then ran from the apartment, slamming the door behind her.

She got into the car, thrusting the key into the switch, her foot pumping the gas pedal. There was sweat on her face, sweat on her body under her clothes, and her hands were shaking. There's no sense to what I'm doing, she told herself. I'm crazy. Where will I go?

Sagebloom.

The motor turned over once and then without actually seeing it she felt a shadow rise behind her, and a voice spoke. The sound of the voice was like a great buzzing shattering electric shock that stunned her with her hand still on the switch. Her heart seemed to rise, almost to burst, to choke her with its beating.

The voice said, "Don't look back. Just start the car and drive off nice and slow. Don't head for downtown. Go over Laurel Canyon Boulevard to the valley."

The car was running. Even through the beating of the pulse in her head, even through the shattered confusion, she knew that. She put it in gear. The car began to back from the garage.

The garage. Where, somehow, she had always expected to meet Tommy. Nightmares did come true.

"Where is Stephanie?"

"Right here beside me."

"Stephanie?"

"She can't talk right now. Something in her mouth."

A strange car, a blue sedan sat where it almost blocked her turn, and she knew that this was the car Tommy had come here in. It was blocking one of the garages, and she thought, the police will come and look at it. Or Reves will find it. If he comes and I'm not here, surely he'll come down here and look around.

And how will that help? her common sense told her. You'll be far away from here.

She said some garbled prayers, inwardly, conscious of his breathing at her back. Suddenly, much too soon it seemed, she had come to Laurel Canyon Boulevard and was on the winding grade that led to Mulholland Drive on the summit. Then, once past the crest, the car began to swoop downward toward the valley.

"Control it," Tommy warned. "We don't want the attention of any cops. Or rather I guess you don't. You wouldn't, for the cop's sake. You know I've never used a gun. I never pulled a trigger in my life. The cop would see me throwing out this shoebox and because he's a cop he'd run over to see what I was trying to get rid of. And when he turned around—just before dropping, of course—he wouldn't have any face. He might not even have a head."

"Tommy . . ."

"And I have more than one shoebox. Very handy, shoeboxes. Do you know I learned that in the pen? You carry around a bunch of shoeboxes tied in a stack—you could be carrying a severed head in

every one of them—and you know what people think you are?”

She clung dazed to the wheel, guiding the car, her right foot pressing the brake.

“They think you’re a shoe salesman. Really.”

Suddenly she had to ask it. “How could you do that to Mother?”

“Now, that subject,” he said promptly, “is out of bounds.”

“Tell me.”

“If you keep asking, I won’t bother to tell you. I’ll do something else, and you won’t like it.”

“Was it . . . was it in any way an accident? I mean, that you didn’t really—”

“But I did, really.”

“To murder her like that—”

“Shut up.”

Now there were whimpering, muffled noises and Shelly realized all at once that she had done something heartless; Stephanie hadn’t known that Mother was dead, and in this terrifying ordeal she had to find that out, too.

The traffic slowed and stopped at Ventura Boulevard, and whether he liked it or not, Shelly turned deliberately in the seat to look at him, forcing herself to study him.

He looked well. He looked fit and strong and in control of himself. There was no prison pallor. He was well-tanned, so that his blue eyes seemed light by contrast. His hair and eyebrows were bleached by the sun. He wore a sport shirt and slacks, both dark brown. Beside him on the seat were about a dozen shoeboxes, tied in stacks of three with hempen string. For a moment Shelly thought, Stephanie isn’t even there! But then she saw the humped shape at his feet, covered with what seemed to be an old yellow canvas. She started to put a hand back, involuntarily, and instantly his fingers seized her wrist. There was a twisting motion and her hand burned with fiery pain and then went numb.

“Just drive, damn you.”

The pain had brought sudden tears to her eyes, but more than that, the terror, the belief in what Tommy could do to her and to

Stephanie, the breathless fright, made the world swim. The cars began to move ahead of her but she sat moveless.

"Get started."

She managed to shift with her numbed hand. The car crept up to join the traffic flow.

"Get on the northbound freeway. Out past San Fernando you turn right on a new highway, Route 6. It goes to Palmdale."

She was awkward. The car bucked and stuttered when it was time to turn on Ventura. He cursed her from the rear seat. She knew that his eyes were searching, waiting for the interference of some police officer.

The next half-hour was a terrifying blur of stop-and-go traffic, of working her way into the freeway interchange, where she inadvertently killed the motor, where he reached over to put a hand on her arm. He was warning her. There was so little time, such a small margin of safety. They were riding with a bomb.

Finally she was able to turn right on the new freeway toward the desert. There was already a dry warmth, a cleanness, in the air. The hills still showed a trace of green from the rains of February. She tried to force herself to relax. She tried to pry the terror, the fixed concentration on the motor, from her mind, to let the motion of the car unravel the tension. She told herself, I must plan. I have to be ready for the least chance. I have to find a way to escape, to take Stephanie with me, without his killing us. I have to get out of the car before he can do anything with what he's carrying in those shoeboxes.

Perhaps Stephanie is tied. Perhaps she's helpless and couldn't move even if the chance came.

First of all, I have to find out what he's done to her.

Tommy too seemed calmer now that the car was speeding along on the wide new freeway. "I hadn't really planned to come to your place. I didn't think about dragging you into this. Not at first. Not even until this morning."

She didn't want to hold a conversation with him. She wanted to sort among the desperate choices open to her.

"Know why I changed my mind? It didn't have anything to do with you."

"I don't know."

"They'll be looking for me. Every cop up here will have a mug shot and a full description. Of course I don't look a lot like I did. I've tanned a lot. But enough. So when we get close to Palmdale I'm going to duck under this old tarp with Steph."

Her heart skidded. He'd be covered, not able to see . . .

"Don't get any ideas, though. There's not a thing wrong with my ears. By the way—" He leaned forward to peer at the instrument panel. "Plenty of gas. Well, that's dandy."

"Tommy . . . whatever you feel you have to do to the railroad . . ."

He laughed a little, and there was a note of satisfaction in it.

". . . leave Stephanie out of it."

"You keep in close touch with the railroad, don't you? You know what I asked them for?"

"They won't pay it."

"Maybe not right away. But pretty soon," Tommy said confidently. "Oh, I wouldn't be surprised to get two suitcases full of old newspaper this first time. I don't intend to touch it anyhow. After I fix a couple of trains, they'll come to this idea—give me the money and then catch me when I spend it."

"If you'll listen to me," Shelly said, not even knowing where the thought had come from, "I'll help you to get away. Now. Not later, when they've closed in on you and the money."

He didn't laugh but she sensed the cruel smile. "And just how would you do this thing, this remarkable favor?"

"We'll go on north, all the way to San Francisco. I'll buy you a bus ticket."

"Why not put me on a ship? I wouldn't have any way to get off before the cops came after me in a police boat."

"Tommy, I promise you—"

"You bore me. You're stupid, Shelly. You always had that funny streak, promises, word of honor. Cross-my-heart-and-hope-to-die."

Crap." He slapped her from behind, and the shock almost tore her hands from the wheel, and then a great throbbing heat burst in the side of her head and her ear rang. "You wobble that wheel again and you'll never know what sent us all up," he warned. "I really don't have anything to lose. I don't even expect to get the hundred G's, to tell you the truth. I figure I'll get foxed out some way. But I'm going to make a hell of a bang when I go. And I don't much care whether it's now, or then."

The urge to stop the car and run, come what may, was almost overpowering. She clenched the wheel tightly, and the stinging heat gradually faded, and she could focus again on the spinning road.

For a while Tommy said nothing. There was no sound from Stephanie. The warm wind blew in at the top of the window, and Shelly tried to cling to a dying hope.

"You're going to turn off in a few miles," Tommy told her. "Look for the highway east, a sign that says Sagebloom. I won't be up to watch but I'll be listening. And I'll be ready."

She heard the rustle of the yellow canvas, a whimpered protest from Stephanie. After a moment she risked a look back. The hump on the floor had more than doubled in size now. But anyone looking at the car from outside would see only the driver.

Then she saw the highway patrol car a long way in the distance. It was in the other section of the divided freeway, headed south. She changed lanes, moving over in a long oblique, getting into the center where she would be closest when the black-and-white car went past, and for a minute her thoughts blazed with a plan of waving, signaling, beckoning, to attract the attention of the police officer.

He could turn at the next break in the divider, follow her, make his move at the right time, the cautious time . . .

But how was she to let him know the right time, or that caution was necessary?

If she were stopped would there be any way to prevent Tommy

using his terrible weapon? Could she and Stephanie hope to overpower him?

The highway cruiser was drawing closer. There was sun-dazzle from its glass. She had only a few moments to decide what she must do.

She began to roll down the window.

"What are you doing?" snapped Tommy's voice.

"It's getting hot in here. I'm rolling down the window." With a few quick twists the window was down; she laid her hand in the open frame.

"I hear somebody coming up on the right," Tommy said. "Where the hell are you? Are you out in the middle lane?"

"I had to pass," she lied.

"Get back over in the right lane and go slow," he commanded. "It's not far to the turn-off. Keep your wits about you. There'll be a cruiser there."

Her eyes jerked off the approaching car, away from the dazzle of light on its windshield, to the interchange ahead. A huge sign that straddled the freeway warned of the turn a quarter-mile on: SAGE-BLOOM, RED CANYON. And there, as Tommy had told her, were the police cruisers. Two of them. They were parked on either side of the interchange, facing the traffic.

She must have made some involuntary sound for Tommy said at once, "See it?"

"Yes."

"Just like I said, huh?"

"Two of them. Two cars. I can see an officer standing outside one car."

"A roadblock?"

The tone warned her what would happen at a roadblock. "No. They're watching, that's all."

"Go slow. Take it easy."

The black-and-white highway patrol car swept past on her left. She lifted a hand, let it drop back upon the wheel. Danger was coming closer with each turn of the tires.

"How's it look?" Tommy said softly.

She didn't answer. What should she do now?

The officer standing outside the cruiser had stepped forward. He was holding up a gloved hand, signaling her to stop.

Chapter Twenty

The car lurched, the tires squealed, as she thrust her foot on the brake pedal. She heard Tommy cursing, stirring under the tarp. There were whimpers from Stephanie. Stephanie's terror was like a cold wind at Shelly's back. Stephanie was under the tarp with Tommy and she must know what he was doing now.

The officer stepped forward with what seemed to Shelly to be a surprised, perhaps curious look. "Miss? Where are you headed?"

Not Sagebloom, something warned her. "R-Red Canyon. I don't l-live there. I'm v-visiting someone."

Surely he must sense her stark fright and hear the breathless stutter when she spoke. But he was nodding, not coming any closer, not looking into the car as she had expected. "Well, since you're driving alone, we wanted to give you a word of advice. Don't pick up any hitchhikers."

"Oh, I w-wouldn't anyway," she managed.

"All right." He was turning as he waved her on.

Don't pick up any hitchhikers. . . .

She had an insane urge to laugh at the complacent officer now going back to lean against the black-and-white car.

She put the car into gear, and then she did hear laughter, low and mocking. Tommy was laughing. He was laughing at all stupid cops and perhaps at all inept and timid women. Shelly guided the car back into the freeway, the right lane, and for a while she drove,

not thinking or planning, knowing her own inadequacy, her lack of command, her inability to act when the time called for it.

What I should have done . . .

She had a mental image of herself leaping from the car as it rolled to a halt, screaming a warning at the astonished officer, then running and running until she found some depression in which she could fling herself to avoid the blast. As Tommy raised up with one of the boxes in his hands, the cop had shot him.

All this took place in her mind's eye.

But no. The cop would have walked over to the car to see what was in it. He might have a gun out, but perhaps not. And then from the car something would have gone flying toward him . . .

Stephanie. I couldn't have run, leaving Stephanie with him.

A querulous inner voice, born of terror, wondered why Stephanie couldn't be abandoned. She'd delivered herself into Tommy's hands deliberately, hadn't she? She'd sneaked out of the convent in defiance of every rule of the nuns, every pleading of Shelly's? So why should Shelly have to die, too, to pay for that disobedience?

Shelly closed her eyes against the sun-glare. There was very little traffic on this eastbound road. The country was rolling desert, with little saw-toothed hills out along the horizon. There were lumpish clouds in the distance; they seemed to be rising a little. The breeze that came in through the open window was warm and dry-smelling. The pavement unwound beneath the tires and Shelly leaned on the wheel. She felt infinitely old and worn, tired beyond endurance. And irritable. The rasp of fear had laid her nerves raw.

The car lurched onto the shoulder of the road and hit a chuck hole.

"What are you doing?" Tommy said, right at her side.

He had come out from the tarp. There were no cars in sight.

"Are you cracking up, or something?" he demanded. When she shook her head, he added with grisly amiability, "You want to get out?"

Get out and die . . .

"No. I'll be all right."

"I need you to get through Sagebloom, but not any more after that," he reminded her.

"Why don't you take that gag, or whatever it is, out of Stephanie's mouth?"

"I don't like her whining."

"Please."

"Shut up. Now listen to me. You're going through Sagebloom pretty quick. When you get to the corner where the service station is, look at your speedometer. Remember what your mileage is, right at that point. Got that?"

"Yes."

"You watch the speedometer and exactly eight miles from the service station you start looking for a rocky wash. You won't see the road. It's been washed out there. You turn into the wash . . . first, though, you make sure no car's in sight."

"I turn into the wash. Right or left?"

"Right." He slid down while a Ford pickup passed them, going in the other direction. "It's rough for a little way but it's passable. You won't bust a tire or anything. Watch for high rocks that might tear out the transmission. After you've gone a short distance the wash turns but you keep straight on. You climb a bank—it's not high—and then you find the road. Once you're on that, I'll take over."

The highway climbed a rise, and ahead of them Shelly saw some billboards and what looked like an abandoned store building. A lizard skittered across the pavement and she braked and swerved to keep from running over it, and Tommy laughed with scorn.

"I can't help it."

"You're just nuts, Shelly."

Was there some softening, some humor, in his voice? "Please, Tommy—let us go. Don't take us with you to this place."

"You remember what I told you a minute ago? About the washed-out road, the wash that lets you onto it?"

"Yes."

"That's the reason I won't let you go. That's a secret. It's important. You can drive back and forth over those rocks in that wash and there's no sign, no fresh tracks, no tire marks, nothing."

"If I promised—"

"I don't want to swat you again. Now, look, we're coming to Sagebloom. I'll have to get out of sight and you'll be watching the speedometer."

The tarp rustled. The car crested another rise and there below was the town. There were houses scattered over the hills, Shelly noticed. A single brief block comprised the business section. To the right was a railroad station. It looked old, though it was well-kept. To the left were buildings, most of them built of corrugated iron with false fronts of painted or stuccoed timber. She saw the service station, the brightly painted pumps, the black asphalt paving. She put her foot on the brake for a moment and looked at the speedometer.

When Reves got to the office, Pete had a sheaf of stuff ready for him, even including a sketched map with mileages inked in.

"That country looks empty," Pete told him, "at first glance. But there's more than you think. There are ghost towns out there, abandoned mines, old lake beds that've been worked for borax and sulfur and what not and where there are still buildings standing—"

"You'd need a plane," Reves said, shaking his head.

"Yeah, and that's what I'm coming to. You know, the Sheriff's office in some of those desert counties has helicopters, for rescue work. Why not ask the boss to check with Palmdale? If they don't have one they might be able to call on one of the other counties."

"Still . . . the country's big. You'd almost have to know where to look."

"He won't be too far off the highway," Pete pointed out. "He must have a car. If you could find that—"

Reves looked toward Ryerson's sanctum. A couple of L.A.P.D. men were in there already, and Ryerson was lighting up one of his cigars. "I hope he lets me go. I want to get started."

"One more thing," Pete offered. "You know . . . if Collins went back up there, where he knows we're going to look for him—and that's kind of stupid when you think about it—it means he's got some kind of protection. I thought, maybe a go-between, somebody he can trust. A guide."

Reves remembered the store of food, the camp provisions under the abandoned hoppers. "Someone to shop for him, bring him food for instance."

"That's right."

"He found that someone damned quick."

"Maybe it's somebody he knew in the pen, somebody who got out, who lived out here or who had relatives here."

"Or maybe he just makes friends fast."

"Some friends aren't hard to make."

"Not if you have something in common," Reves agreed.

He went in to speak to Ryerson. Ryerson asked him to remain for the conference, and to ask Pete to come in, too.

An All Points Bulletin had to be prepared on Collins. The police of other railroads had to be alerted. Though it seemed, because of the demand for money, that Collins intended to hit this railroad, nothing could be taken for granted. The police departments of all outlying communities must be warned so that they could help set the trap.

Any unauthorized person seen loitering around a railroad was to be instantly suspect.

There was some news on Collins from out of the past. In the prison hospital, where he had killed a prison nurse and two other inmates, he had not simply undergone treatment for an old foot injury. He was also up for psychological examination. The prison doctor considered Collins a dangerous maniac.

"Kind of late for that opinion," Reves said.

Ryerson nodded grimly. "Keep it in mind. You won't get careless."

The money came up for discussion, and Ryerson suggested that Pete get together some cuttings of old newspapers.

"That's what he's going to expect," Ryerson admitted, "but we can't do any better now. The head office isn't going to okay a hundred thousand in small bills without putting up a fight. That is—without *us* putting up a fight."

The head office was at a safe distance, in Oakland. What kind of emergency would permit shelling out a sum like one hundred thousand, Reves couldn't imagine. People would have to die, Reves thought. There would have to be a complete breakdown of train movements. Chaos.

Could Collins bring it off?

Reves remembered that Collins hadn't done badly at all in disorganizing railroad operations in his home territory.

Ryerson was speaking to Reves now. "I've already sent Brian and Holbrook up there, each in his own car—they're going to patrol from Red Canyon eastward, especially any approaches to the new right of way. Farrel's on a train, looking for any fresh tracks near the old spurs. So, suppose you go on into Palmdale and see what you can do about this idea of Pete's, using a helicopter?"

Reves nodded.

"He has to use a car, as Pete says, and the car ought to be pretty easy to spot providing it's out in all that wilderness."

This was sort of Pete's case, Reves thought to himself. It had, in a way, belonged to Pete from the very beginning, when he had noticed and commented on the Special M.O. Bulletin on Collins. And Pete's ideas had, since then, provided the short cuts and kept things moving.

Pete was looking up at him as Reves rose. "Call me from Palmdale and let me know what goes, will you?"

"Will do." Meanwhile, Reves told himself, I'm going to telephone Shelly Collins. She must think I'm in Sagebloom by now, looking for her brother. She'll wonder, when she doesn't hear from me.

He used a phone in the outer office and rang the apartment, but there was no answer. Reves decided that he would call again, from Palmdale. By then she should be back from wherever she'd gone.

Farrel's eyes ached from staring into sunny space, and he was thirsty. The swaying of the caboose was monotonous and when he let himself think about it, faintly nauseating. He'd seen about fifteen species of wildlife, which had surprised him, since he knew that most of the desert animals were night creatures, sleeping by day and coming out when it was cool. In the distance he had even thought he'd seen a desert antelope leaping about, though that seemed queer this close to civilization. Could have been a wild burro, he decided. A fast, nervous one.

None of the old spur tracks had anything like tire marks alongside. Occasionally the railroad crossed straggling roads, and he looked at these, and couldn't find anything that seemed significant. Farrel was bored and he had the feeling he had left important work undone.

At a small station far this side of Pete's suggested turning point, Farrel dropped off and waited for a freight back.

Collins was much too cute, in Farrel's opinion, to leave broken brush along an old spur, or to leave tracks anywhere.

He got back to Sagebloom with the feeling of having wasted some three hours. He went at once to the bar and ordered a drink. Mrs. Deppler was not in sight. The bartender must be having another siesta, since he was being spelled by a young man who didn't look old enough to be pouring drinks. Farrel made a few attempts at conversation but met with little response. The assistant barkeep finally pulled a *Hot-Rod* magazine from under the counter and buried himself in it, letting Farrel know where his interests lay.

"What about that heap the Deppler kids own?" Farrel said, breaking in on the young man's greedy reverie.

"What about it?"

"Where'd they get it?"

"Their ma bought it for them. She thought they'd go to school more often if they had their own transportation. About half the time they're barred off the school bus." He tried to start reading again.

"Has it been souped up?"

The younger man frowned. "They work on it a lot. I guess if there were any parts around that they could steal, they'd fix it up to go fast. But as it is . . . nuh uh. It's just a crate."

"How well do you know them?"

"I don't. And I don't want to."

"And their mother?"

"She's all right. She's crazy to stay there, though."

"How do they spend their time if they don't go to school?"

"They poke around."

"Poke around out in the desert, you mean?"

"That's right. Some feller came through here six, eight months ago wanting to buy snakes. He had some zoo, you know, one of those things by the highway to get people to come in and buy gas and eats. The Deppler kids went out and got him all the snakes he wanted. I guess more than he wanted. Anyway, they know the country, that's for sure."

Farrel sat staring into his drink and thinking. In a city the Depplers would be the tough kids on any block, the kingpins in a gang of hoodlums. You might say that the city was where they really belonged, since there they'd fit a pattern that was understood and accepted as a normal part of things, even while it was deplored. Out here in this tiny town they were despised as outlaws.

They could wind up in the city, of course. In which case they'd soon acquire police records and eventual long prison terms. If their mother could hang onto them long enough, keep them here, there was a chance they'd settle down. They wouldn't ever have an education but they could learn to be mechanics. They could operate mining machinery, bulldozers, or some such. Apparently there was an interest in that direction, to judge from the time they spent on the old car.

Farrel remembered that the last time he'd been in Palmdale he'd found it necessary to call at a wrecking yard, trying to chase down some missing ironwork.

Finishing the drink, he made up his mind how high he was will-

ing to go. This equation was arrived at by the consideration of what Ryerson would tolerate, and the state of his own bank account.

He nodded to the temporary barkeeper and collected his change.

Chapter Twenty-one

The kids were in the Buick, just as the bartender had prophesied. One had a cigarette in his mouth, too, but the other one had what looked like a small electric motor propped on the dash, working on it with a screwdriver. When Farrel pulled up beside the old car they both looked over at him without surprise.

Mrs. Deppler was in the rear seat. She had a sofa pillow stuffed in the corner against the window, the shape of her head pressed into it, and Farrel thought she'd been trying to get some rest before it was time to go back to fix dinner for the bar patrons. She was sitting erect by the time he saw her. She didn't smile, didn't frown, just regarded him with impassive distrust.

He got out and went over. The old car was hot. The window frame felt hot through his sleeves when he laid his arms on it. Not a word of greeting came from the three inside. The inside smelled of old mildewed upholstery, oil, and sweat.

"My name is Farrel and I'm from the railroad police." He displayed the ID with elaborate patience.

"We know that," she said. The kids didn't even blink.

"I'm not going to give you a line of bull about co-operating with the law. I know that won't get me anywhere. When I was your age I'd have cussed out anybody that suggested I ought to be nice to cops. I guess I wouldn't even have cussed them out. I'd have tried to beat 'em up."

The one sitting behind the wheel showed his teeth in a grin. The

one working on the motor shook his head as if admiring the new line the railroad dick was handing him.

"I'm going to offer a deal. Something for something. You talk and I'm giving. I'm giving this: a fifty dollar credit at Tom's Auto Wrecking in Palmdale."

He couldn't see any reaction whatever. Mrs. Deppler was looking out past him at the scenery, which must have been familiar. The two kids had enough Indian, Farrel decided, to cover anything they felt. The one who was smoking studied the end of the cigarette. The other examined a bit of the electric motor.

"I've been to the wrecking yard," Farrel went on softly, "and I noticed what a big high fence they've got all around it. Of course there are wrecks parked outside at the back, but they've been stripped. There isn't anything worth copping off them. I understand Tom owns a police dog too and he leaves the dog inside at night."

The one behind the wheel yawned, working his jaw back and forth. Mrs. Deppler rubbed a hand across her upper lip as if to wipe away a trace of perspiration.

"I guess that's about the biggest used-parts place around this part of the country. You might fix this heap up a little if you had some credit there."

For just a moment Mrs. Deppler's glance settled on the backs of her sons' heads, and Farrel thought that just for a moment there was something like sudden hope in her eyes.

"How about it?"

The one behind the wheel turned to his brother. "You hear anything? You hear something buzzing, like? You hear a sound?"

"I don't hear a thing," said the other, frowning at the motor. She said, "Boys—"

"We don't hear a thing," said the biggest one over his shoulder.

"All right." Farrel took his arms off the doorframe, shook his coat to settle it down over him, and turned toward his own car.

A soft voice followed him. "Make it a hundred and we might hear you."

He opened the car door, then looked across the hood at the two kids. The masks were down now. There was no mistaking the desire, nor the worry that Farrel was going to hop behind the wheel and sail away.

"You talk to your mother. I'll be downtown. I'll wait five minutes."

"A hundred?"

"Seventy-five."

"Eighty."

He hesitated. "We'll see what you've got."

When he got back to the business block he drove around behind the bar. The hard-packed dirt made a parking lot. He set the brake, looked at his watch so he'd know when the five minutes were up, and then heard the Buick. The kids, their mother still in the back seat, pulled in beside him. The one who'd been working on the motor rolled down his window. Mrs. Deppler leaned forward to listen.

Farrel said, "Where did you meet Collins?"

"You mean Tiger?"

"The one with the dynamite."

They exchanged a look. Then the older one said, "We picked him up. He was headed for L.A. and somebody took him out here and dumped him. It was a heist. He'd had three or four hundred and they took it and dumped him."

Farrel felt an ironic amusement. *The robber robbed.*

"They took his car, too, but we helped him find it. They ditched it in Palmdale, right on the main drag."

Translating this, Farrel decided that Collins had simply picked up a car in Palmdale, the first one probably that looked decent and had a key in its ignition. "He needed money. He had to pull a job, maybe more than one. Were you in on that?"

They seemed shocked, perhaps for their mother's benefit. "He had a bank account back East. He got his money through the bank."

I'll bet. "You did more for him than just drive him around Palmdale. What else?"

The older one touched his brother's arm, a warning. Leaning on the wheel so as to face Farrel in the other car, he said, "He wanted a place to stay. A camping place. He had something to do and he wanted a spot that wouldn't cost anything and a place where people wouldn't be watching him."

"He told you about breaking out of prison?"

Again the air of shock, phonier now in Farrel's opinion. He decided that Collins had done some bragging and that the two kids had been much impressed.

"We just guessed he'd been in some kind of trouble."

"He was in the pen . . . the Middle West . . . and he dynamited the prison hospital to get out. He blew up a prison nurse and a couple of other patients. I suppose you helped him find some dynamite?"

"We showed him a couple of places he could stay," said the older boy. "If he got himself some dynamite, he did it on his own."

"He blew up his own mother last night in Los Angeles."

A look of astonished fear flickered across Mrs. Deppler's features.

"An old lady in a nursing home. She'd come out here to get away from him because she was afraid."

The boy behind the wheel threw a scared glance over his shoulder at his mother. "We didn't have a thing to do with— Look. All we did, we picked him up on the road. We took him to Palmdale. He saw a car and said, yeah, that was his. We let him out. He followed us back here and said he needed this place, this place off by itself—"

"Which is . . . *where?*"

"Well, we . . . we showed him more than one."

"Those old houses at Las Pulgas?"

"Heck, no. There's too much traffic through there."

"The yards at Red Canyon?"

"You crazy or something?"

"The office at Painted Creek?"

For a moment the kid hesitated. Then he nodded a little. "Yeah. Where the hoppers are. There's never anybody there any more."

"And where else?"

The kids exchanged a glance that Farrel couldn't read. Then the older one said, "How about the money we're supposed to get?"

"You don't get any money. Tom's wrecking place gets the money."

"Well, but when? How do we know you'll go through with it? You're a—"

Farrel looked at Mrs. Deppler in the rear seat. "Eighty bucks for parts. It ought to keep them busy for a while. They might even learn something."

She said, "Tell him about the other place."

A wordless conference went on. Then almost unwillingly, the older kid said, "You ever hear of Drover's Sink?"

Farrel shook his head. Mrs. Deppler said, "It's a ghost town. Or what's left of it. A few old shacks." She addressed her sons. "You showed him the turn-off?"

They seemed sullen now. "Of course."

For a moment she seemed to hesitate, perhaps over some memory, and then she told Farrel: "I used to go there to paint. Years ago. The road's not easy to find . . . well, I guess it would be impossible to find . . . unless you knew where to look."

"You tell me where to look," Farrel said.

She told him.

Farrel started at the service station with a glance at the speedometer. Eight miles, he told himself. Two paloverde trees and a rocky wash.

Either I'm ahead of him and I've got to find a way to hide the car and wait, or I'm behind him in which case I'm apt to have my head blown off.

Eight miles from the service station there was only one paloverde tree. Well, Mrs. Deppler had said that she thought one had

gone down in last winter's rainy floods. The rocky wash was there. Farrel paused, looked both ways down the highway. He wondered if the car could make it. It was going to take careful driving. You could tear out the transmission on some of these boulders.

He put the car in low gear and crept off the shoulder of the road. Once down among the rocks it wasn't as bad as it had looked from above, and there were level patches where the rocks made no worse a paving than old cobblestones. The wash rose slightly toward a curving bank. Mrs. Deppler said he'd have to climb the bank but that this was possible.

When he finally reached the rising sandy incline where the wash turned he stopped the car and got out. Collins must have been using this way but at first there seemed nothing, no tire marks, not even scraped earth, no sign at all. And then, gleaming on a rock, he found a small dark stain, perfectly round, gleaming. He put down a finger, took up a trace of the stain, rubbed it between his fingers. Oil. Crankcase oil out of a car. Surely it was too fresh to have been here long. Was Collins already at Drover's Sink and holed up among the ruins?

Yes, Farrel decided, Collins was ahead of him, knowing that the decision could literally mean the difference between being alive tomorrow morning, and not being.

Did Collins have the girl with him?

Farrel thought about this, standing there in the sunny desert heat. A little wind caught up some of the loose sand at the top of the bank and whirled it into a funnel, then moved off to rattle the ocotillo.

Farrel told himself, always before this Collins had used dynamite. Would he change now, would he kill the young sister by strangulation, by blows? Farrel found himself shaking his head. No. Collins would keep on using dynamite and the best place to do that was out here where no one would hear or see.

I ought to go back to town, Farrel thought. I ought to call Pete and let him know what I think and where I'm headed.

Farrel looked at his car and wondered how he could turn around on the rocks.

I won't do it. I'm going on.

Under this decision was the unexpressed knowledge that lately the drinking had been getting a little out of hand. He was being too obvious about it and Ryerson was going to have to call him into that green-carpeted cubbyhole and tie a can to his tail. He needed to pull a hot one out of the fire; and after that they'd look the other way for a long time.

He knew what was bugging him, though he rarely let it out into the open. His child was almost grown now. She would be twenty years old in June. Somewhere.

Farrel got into the car and inched it forward. For a moment he wondered if he could make it up the incline. Gravelly dirt spun off under the tires. Then there was a lurch, he gunned the motor, and the car climbed to the top. Ahead lay five or six miles of chuck-holed untended road where according to Mrs. Deppler it would be no trouble at all to break an axle.

The country had this terrible sameness, Farrel thought. You seemed to round the same broken hills over and over, you found the same ocotillo leaning over the rutted track, you passed the same lava outcropping and the same red-iron banks. But Mrs. Deppler had assured him that when he came within sight of Drover's Sink he wouldn't mistake it.

Drover's Sink had once been a lake. The old lake bed had held caustic soda and other chemicals, now long exhausted.

Mrs. Deppler's words returned. "As soon as you catch sight of the old lake, stop. You can't see the shacks from there and he can't see you either—if he's there. You'd better go on by foot. It isn't far." She had also suggested a way to drive off and get his car out of sight in a deep wash, but Farrel felt now that this wasn't necessary. Collins was ahead of him, wouldn't come along afterward to be warned by his car sitting in the open.

The rutted road began a long climb to a cleft in the hills. Farrel had a hunch that he was almost there. He wondered how far the

sound of the motor might carry. Still following a hunch, he stopped the car below the top of the grade and walked the rest of the way. This flank of the hills was absolutely barren, even of cacti. The eroded earth was straw-white, bleached by eons of desert sun. When he reached the cleft where the road crested, there was a touch of breeze and he stood in it gratefully. Below, as he had expected was the vast pothole of Drover's Sink.

No sign of the ghost town. He walked down the road a bit and then off to the left he saw a half-dozen or so rotting shacks. The road led that way. The shacks were perched along the spine of a promontory. Once no doubt they'd sat level on their pilings. Now they were hulks, tilting every which-way.

Farrel paused to study them.

There was no sign of a car. The windows of the nearest shacks gaped with shadow, emptily.

If he continued along the road he would approach from slightly above the town and he would be highly noticeable. Mrs. Deppler had said there were old paths here, some skirting the town lower down. Farrel searched for some trace of these paths, finally decided he saw one and went along the road to it. It looked like an old cattle track, though it seemed improbable that this country could ever have supported domestic stock. It wound down under a rocky bank. Where it went from there, Farrel couldn't tell.

Crouching to keep from being silhouetted, Farrel went down the path to the point where it turned. Here he got a surprise. There were two more shacks, visible from this spot and much lower on the promontory. Either they'd been built later or someone had attempted to keep them in repair, for they were in much better shape.

This was where Collins would be holed up, then, Farrel thought, peering around the shoulder of the stony bank.

He frowned, though. There was no sign of a car.

Could Collins have come here *without* a car?

No. It wasn't possible.

He hadn't come here then. He was still in L.A. Or somewhere else. He could be anywhere, with his dynamite, getting ready to

teach the railroad a lesson in economics regarding the value of one hundred thousand dollars.

Farrel felt a terrible letdown, a rush of disappointment. He'd guessed wrong. Collins hadn't come.

What about the oil spot on the stone? Yesterday's?

And if Collins came *now*—he'd see Farrel's car sitting there on the grade, right out in the open.

Farrel turned his head to glance at the silent distances, and then from the corner of his eye he caught movement, a faint glimpse of something light-colored inside the nearest shack.

A curtain blowing?

No. It came again. Someone had crossed the room beyond the open window.

Farrel stepped back in a hurry to keep from being seen. He stepped back without looking. A rock turned under the sole of his shoe, his foot skidded toward the edge of the trail. The next instant, grabbing at nothing, his mind ablaze with shock and unbelief, he went over the edge into empty space.

Chapter Twenty-two

They lay bound on the floor, back to back, with one of the shoeboxes between them, wired to their bonds.

They could see Tommy by turning their heads a little. There were a couple of old broken-backed kitchen chairs in the place, and he sat on one of these, leaning forward with his elbows propped on his knees, his eyes blank but his lips smiling a little. "You move and you're dead," he told them. He seemed to feel a pleased satisfaction. "If you can keep real still all day I'll let you free, maybe, for a minute or so tonight. Long enough to eat. That is, if we all live till then."

He fixed his eyes on Stephanie, and then laughed. "What's the matter, baby? You've never seen your own brother before?"

Stephanie whispered, "Please . . ." It was just a ghost of a word, without hope, without real meaning. Stephanie had been gasping it at him from what must be a cotton-dry mouth ever since he'd taken the gag away.

Shelly quit looking at him and let her head sag to rest against the rough boards. She was terribly tired now. Her eyes burned with unshed tears. The thought had come a few moments ago, that here together at last again were all of her mother's children, all that was left of their family, and this had brought such a tearing, unendurable pain that she had tried to shut it away.

When he had first dragged Stephanie from under the canvas, and she'd seen how he had beaten the child, she had wanted to cry, too. But something had warned her. Tommy wouldn't endure tears at this point. Perhaps though he had guessed how she felt, for he'd been very rough tying them up.

If he would only go now. . . .

If he left, she could try to comfort Stephanie. She would soothe and cheer the child so that she would lie still. Without some sort of comforting, Stephanie would never lie quiet enough to keep those taut wires from pulling out of the shoebox.

Or . . . perhaps he was fooling them. Perhaps Tommy was playing a grim, grisly joke and there was really nothing in the box, or maybe just a couple of stones to give it weight. It was exactly the sort of joke he would delight in. She should look at him now and try to read his eyes. When he had been small she had always been able to tell his real mood and whether he was playing a trick.

She heard the rustle of Tommy's clothes, then the scratch of a match. He had lit a cigarette.

I should look at him, she told herself. But she was tired . . . tired . . .

Surely he had some errand, something to take him away for the day, a reason for tying them here. When he's gone, she thought, I'll

rouse. But right now I want to keep my eyes shut and mostly I don't want to think about our parents.

But the thought wouldn't go away.

I wonder if *they* know what's happening to all of us now?

Stephanie was whispering again. Apparently she had gathered some scrap of courage, for Shelly realized that she was asking Tommy if he would let them go when he got all that money.

The question, its naïveté perhaps, must have amused him. Shelly could tell from the tone of his voice that he was smiling. "Oh, I might, baby. I just might."

Stephanie's whisper again: "Are you going to get the money today?"

"Oh, no. Not today. I'm not even ready to tell them how to get it to me, today. Some things I've got to check, first. And then to help them decide, I might just blow up a few little things. Nothing big. Just a couple of switches or a culvert, just enough to make them a little anxious."

"Won't they catch you?"

He had quit smiling. The questions were prodding now and Shelly wanted to say, *Stephanie, stop*. "One of the things I've got to check—whether we picked up a tail anywhere along the way. I don't think we did, but I've got to know. And I want to be sure my friends are on the ball, my friends in Sagebloom—"

Well, Shelly thought, the friends explained why they were *here*.

"—just a pair of kook kids," he went on with a touch of scorn. "They've been handy, though. I guess they've got some idea I'm the reincarnation of Dillinger or somebody. I guess they watch the late late show too much. Television. Something I sure missed during the last three years, by the way." There was a long pause. "Somebody's going to pay for those years."

"And when you get the money . . ." Stephanie was whispering hopefully.

"Shut up."

"Please!" Stephanie had gone back to the hopeless echo. A word she'd been taught had all sorts of magic; that it opened doors and

granted wishes; but that even she knew wouldn't make any difference to Tommy.

The room began to fill with the odor of cigarette smoke.

The smell of the smoke is disturbing some bees, Shelly thought. Or, no . . . desert wasps, more likely. There must be a wasps' nest somewhere in this place, somewhere up in the old ceiling where the smoke rose; they were beginning to buzz. The buzzing was very faint as yet but Shelly felt that it would get louder.

It would get louder and Tommy would be annoyed.

Shelly tried to hold her breath to listen, as if keeping utterly still would prevent the noise from increasing.

Tommy went on smoking.

The sound of the buzzing seemed no louder but there was a kind of vibration to it, a pulse, a faint shaking in the air. It's a funny sound for wasps, Shelly thought. The sense of fear made her heart pound. Something was going to happen. She opened her eyes.

Tommy had heard it, too. He had stopped smoking; the cigarette hung from his fingers, forgotten. His back was straight, his head up, and he wore a puzzled expression. He was looking all around, but not at the things here; he was trying to understand what was happening.

Shelly licked her dry lips. I've heard that sound before, she told herself. It's almost like the sound of a plane, but not quite.

Tommy threw away the cigarette and made a sudden dive off the chair, and ducked low toward the nearest window. She saw the shape of his head against the glow of sunshine outdoors. He stayed there crouched and waiting for some minutes, and meanwhile with a grudging slowness the buzzing noise faded.

He looked around at her, found her eyes on him. "Did you hear something?"

"Yes."

"What was it?"

"I thought . . . some kind of insect. A swarm of them."

If he had been close enough he would have hit her. She saw the

savage anger flood his eyes. "You're lying. It wasn't any swarm of insects."

"I guess not. I thought too, a motor of some kind." She tried to sound mild, placating.

"A motor." He looked outside again. Then he stood, moving to one side of the open paneless window, examining the scene. "I'm going out. You stay quiet. There's no way anybody can see the car. But something funny's going on. I can feel it."

Shelly could feel it too. The sense of imminent disaster filled her thoughts; it took all of her control not to panic. Someone would come, blundering in here, and Tommy would kill them all. How did it feel to die in a blast, to vanish in an instant? To be, to exist, and then not to be except as bloody flying atoms?

"If you move," Tommy warned as he crept toward the door, "you're dead. You'll be killing yourself and Steph, too."

"I won't move," she whispered.

Stephanie's whisper came: ". . . please . . ."

The door creaked faintly as he went through. Then there was no sound at all, just the dry warmth in the room, the deserted smell, the fading cigarette smoke, the stinging of the tears she wouldn't shed.

After a long while Stephanie whispered, "What was the noise, Shelly?"

"A motor." I know, and I can't think of it somehow. "Not a car. Not a plane. I'd say . . . an outboard, only of course we're miles from any water at all."

"There could be a lake." In Stephanie's voice was the hope that a lake meant people, help coming, rescue and freedom.

"I'm sure there's not a lake."

Stephanie was quiet for a moment. Then: "Are you awfully mad at me?"

If I could only hold her, comfort her. . . . The tears stung. Shelly forced them back. "I'm not at all angry."

"I didn't have any idea *he'd* be out there."

"Of course you didn't."

"And another thing . . . I don't want you to think the wrong reason, why I left the way I did. They were really good to me there."

"I'm sure they were."

"And you know those things that . . . that Mom used to tell. Those stories. I used to kind of believe them. But they wouldn't do those things. Never in a million years. They aren't like Mom said they were at all."

"I know."

"Why do you suppose she hated them so?"

"It all goes back to our father, Steph. She didn't get along with him and so she just hated everything he stood for. And that included the Church."

"Isn't she kind of to blame for the way Tommy is?"

The adult insight, expressed childishly though it was, surprised Shelly. "There's no use blaming her now."

"Did he really kill her?"

"Yes."

"And you didn't call me right away?"

"I was going to tell you. But first I had to figure out what to do, a way to keep you safe. And then . . . that turned out wrong, too. The wrong thing to do."

"I . . . I want to cry about Mom. I really do feel sorry. But I'm too scared to cry, right now." For a long minute Stephanie was silent. Then, much more softly: "I don't want to die."

The whisper told Shelly that death had become a sudden reality to Stephanie, a reaching presence, an icy hand touching her own warm one and a mask whose eyeless sockets she could not evade. Desperately Shelly told her, "We've got to think hard. We have to make some kind of plan. If we don't . . ."

"What can we do?"

Nothing really. . . .

But Shelly forced despair from her mind. "We're going to find a way to make him let us loose."

"He's scared we'll yell, or something."

"We'll make him believe that we won't!"

Stephanie didn't answer. Perhaps she knew the uselessness of this attempt at hopeful planning.

Shelly felt the first vibrations through the floor, pounding steps on the porch; she jerked her head around to see the doorway. Tommy was coming in and there was someone with him. At sight of the second man and the imminence of what must happen now, such terror rushed through Shelly that she felt her jaws lock, freeze; she couldn't have cried out if she'd had to.

The room seemed to tremble, to dissolve in weird rainbows of light. She felt suffocated. Perhaps we're already dying, she thought.

But after a moment the room began to straighten again and she saw that this second man was not what she had expected. He didn't look like a police officer. He was an older man and his suit seemed nondescript.

He was dusty. His clothes seemed covered with dirt. His face seemed scraped, beginning to swell as if with bruises. There was a cut near the hairline over his temple, and this was bleeding. He walked, or rather allowed Tommy to push him, with a lurching, somehow crippled, gait. She saw that one arm appeared to hang useless.

What had Tommy done to him in the short while he'd been gone?

"I found this joker lying in a ditch," Tommy said. He gave the man a hard shove that sent him into one of the broken chairs. Then Tommy went to a corner of the room and got one of the shoeboxes. He brought it over carefully and lifted the lid and let the other man look in. "You see what I've got here?"

The other man seemed to make a tremendous effort to collect his senses. Shelly noticed that he took a good look at Tommy before he glanced into the shoebox. "I see it."

"Know what it is?"

"Yeah, I know what it is."

Tommy yanked something out of his belt. Shelly couldn't un-

derstand how it had happened, but now obviously Tommy had acquired a gun. It was a big, businesslike gun. He aimed it into the shoebox. "Know what would happen if I took some shots . . . like so?"

The other man didn't seem scared, Shelly thought. He was dirty and tired and badly banged up, but Tommy didn't seem to frighten him. He acted as if he were used to people like Tommy, and this didn't make any sense, either.

"Why don't you try it?" he suggested to Tommy.

Tommy's answer was to take a hard swift swipe at the man with the gun barrel. But again, surprisingly, the man seemed not taken off guard. He managed to duck enough so that he caught most of the blow against his shoulder, and Shelly found herself thinking: *That's what Mr. Reves would do.* And then she knew all at once why she'd been so scared when Tommy had come back with someone else. She had expected it to be Reves with him.

How queer, she thought. I don't want Tommy to get his hands on Mr. Reves. As long as Reves is free I have a kind of hope . . .

She bit back a sudden rush of tears, biting hard on her lip. I don't even know Mr. Reves, really.

So why should I feel like this about him?

"You got a smart mouth, copper," Tommy said.

"So they say."

Shelly watched, not comprehending. Why should Tommy call this man *copper*? Then she decided: of course, he's a railroad detective like Reves. They don't wear uniforms. He's been with the railroad for a long time. That's why he doesn't act afraid of Tommy. He must have slipped and fallen out there in those rocky washes, and Tommy found him and got the gun away.

It was then that Shelly began to hope, just a little, and in spite of the fact that this older man was obviously hurt, without a gun, and at Tommy's mercy. If there was any way to outwit Tommy and to save them from going in a blast with Tommy's explosives, he could do it. And Reves must be outside somewhere . . .

Tommy didn't know anything about Reves but he must have

been thinking along the same general lines. "Where are the rest of them?"

"I came alone."

Tommy started to hit him again with the gun, and then paused. He frowned uncertainly. "Where's your car?"

"I hiked in from the highway."

It was a lie. Shelly knew it; for an instant her heart lurched, thinking that Tommy would know too and that he would strike the other man for lying to him. But Tommy seemed to have his mind on something else. "Who told you where to look?"

"Who else? Your little friends in Sagebloom."

"They wouldn't dare."

"They're like any other kids when their mother makes up her mind to sit down on them."

"I don't believe it."

The railroad detective shrugged. Shelly sensed that he was holding himself erect, facing up to Tommy, by sheer will power. He was older, a much older man than Reves, and he was hurt badly. He wasn't going to last much longer. When Tommy started beating him again, when Tommy got through his guard and pounded him down . . . what then?

It's strange, Shelly thought, to look at the end of your life and know that there's so little of it left. Maybe just moments.

I wish I had a little while longer with Stephanie. . . .

She licked her dry lips and then—like a faint insect-drone with a beat beneath it—she heard the strange humming from the sky.

Chapter Twenty-three

A helicopter.

Why hadn't she realized it before? There was the unmistakable

chop chop chop, and the windy roar hovering above the old house froze them, turned them all to stone. Shelly looked at Tommy. All color had left his face and except for the tan, he was sickly. He was yellowish, withered. The older detective had simply shut his eyes and seemed to be waiting. Waiting for Tommy to kill him, perhaps.

"Tommy—"

He turned to her and suddenly all the years were gone and he was like a child again. He was the brother she had known, growing up lost in rebel ways, hating everything but her.

"I have to tell you something, Tommy. I'm telling it to you so that you'll let Stephanie go, so that you won't kill her as you did Mother—for something she didn't do."

He looked at the gun in his hand. He glanced toward the stack of shoeboxes as if afraid the roaring noise might have sucked them away.

"Tommy. Tommy."

He turned toward her.

"I was the one who called the police that last night. It wasn't Mother nor Stephanie. It was I, your sister Shelly. The one you thought had always loved you, the one you believed you could trust."

He was staring at her now. She couldn't decide whether he believed her or not. His eyes seemed empty of any expression, any shock or hope.

"It's the truth, Tommy. Ask Stephanie."

"No. No," he said dully.

"Yes, Tommy! Tell him, Stephanie!"

Stephanie didn't make a sound. Stubborn child, unflinchingly loyal. She must be made to tell him.

"Stephanie, you have to tell Tommy the truth. He killed Mother because he thought she had betrayed him to the police. You remember that last terrible night. He has some idea that you and Mother planned his capture together, that she did it because you were in danger."

No sound except the high faraway roar and the rushing wind. Stephanie wouldn't speak. It was up to Shelly to convince him. He was going to kill them all now, since he was cornered here from the air and there was no escape and no way to hide.

She said, "Tommy, I had the idea . . . you know, when you were about ready to get away and we knew the police must be looking for you, and Mother was getting you that car and the clothes . . . I had the idea that if you were taken in and had to serve a jail term that it might do something for you. Something nothing else had been able to do, and so I—"

His face twisted with a look of hurt. He believes me, Shelly thought. He knows I'm telling him the truth.

And then an enormous voice blotted out all other sound. A mechanical freak, the mouth of a giant at the window, human syllables and inflection and non-human vocal power; and this new voice said, "Collins, come on out. We know you're in there and you can't get away."

Tommy had been standing, half-turned from the man on the chair, and now he rocked back on his heels and stared at the ceiling.

"Come out, Collins. Come out," said the pounding great voice.

"Go to hell," Tommy said in a near-whisper.

There was a space of waiting in which it seemed, illogically, that the great being who belonged to the terrible voice must be creeping closer.

"Tommy, listen . . ."

Tommy looked at her coolly, measuringly. "I'm going to have to use you, Shelly." He walked over quickly and squatted beside her, working swiftly with the knots and wires at her wrists. "You make a move before I tell you, and we're all dead," he warned. She felt the prickle of wire-ends and heard Stephanie's whispered *please* . . . *please* . . .

"Take Stephanie."

"They know I've got her."

He cursed under his breath, tearing at something behind her. It seemed to Shelly her heart stood still, fixed inside her, pulseless.

Then she felt the ropes drop away and Tommy was yanking her to her feet.

"Please release Steph—"

"No. Come with me." Tommy dragged her toward the door. "They're going to see you."

The sunlight was a blinding glare, beating into her eyes. She felt suddenly weak, a sawdust creature whose filling had run out, tottering, staggering off the rickety boards of the porch into the dazzle. Tommy held her up with an iron grip on one arm. His face was close, his eyes fierce on hers. "I'm . . . I'm sick," she whispered.

"Sure you're sick." He pulled her closer, faced some invisible enemy out in the sunny distances. "We're all sick. We're apt to get a lot sicker. Like being dead. Isn't that about as sick as you can get?"

She was hollow, a thing without insides, a woman of dust.

"We see you, Collins," came the enormous, the electronic voice. "Let the woman go and stand clear."

"Nuts to you," Tommy sang out, his voice childishly thin and light in contrast to the huge vocality of the other.

"What are you trying to prove, Collins?"

"I want a way out. I want the money."

Through Shelly's hazy brain some thoughts struggled. The detective had lied when he had said that he'd walked from the highway. That meant his car was close somewhere. Tommy had carefully hidden her car inside one of the half-fallen shacks, but the detective's car had undone all of his precautions. That's how they'd found him here.

"You're going to have to give yourself up, Collins. You'd better forget about the money and walk forward slowly with your hands up."

Tommy isn't going to do it . . .

Never in a million years.

Didn't they know that?

Suddenly the whining roar above became louder and the helicopter rose into view. Shelly was startled. She realized for the first time that the enormous voice had nothing to do with the machine.

Some time past . . . how long ago? . . . the machine had come and gone. Someone in the machine had reported the car abandoned on the road here. The detective's car.

The machine had guided others here. They were surrounded.

Tommy was not only pinned down, exposed to the thing in the sky, he was watched, guarded, from every direction here on the ground.

He would kill them now, kill Stephanie and herself and the man who sat tired and weaving on the chair in the broken house.

She tried to swallow the dusty taste of fright.

"We're going back inside," Tommy told her, and jerked her about to face the house and there—she didn't believe this hallucination but it was quite vivid—there was Reves on the steps. There was no gun in his hand, no sign of defense against Tommy, nothing. She wanted to scream.

Tommy slid the gun along her ribs between her breast and her arm until it pointed toward Reves and she felt his hand tighten. He was going to shoot Reves.

She twisted, she pulled Tommy's hand by squeezing her arm against her ribs, and now that she was proving an embarrassment, a liability, he wanted to get rid of her. He jerked the gun back and slammed it against her head, and there was a great rocking pain and a gush of something warm down her cheek. She was falling. The earth was hot. It rushed to meet her falling face.

"Tommy . . . don't shoot him . . ."

The shot cracked out and then there was a spattering echo closer at hand, and then a great deal of popping that faded and waned, leaving only the stillness.

Reves was bending over her. He was real, he was there, he was touching her cheek with his handkerchief, he was saying something to comfort her.

"My sister," she got out.

"She's all right."

"Tommy . . ."

"I'm sorry, Miss Collins. He's going fast. He can't last. Do you want to speak to him?"

"It's terribly important."

"Over here, then."

Tommy was on the porch. He looked shrunken and small, the tan faded from his face, his mouth puckered and his eyes remote.

"Tommy."

He moved his eyes over in her direction.

"Tommy, do you remember? You must make a perfect Act of Contrition. Now. Right away. Can you?"

His lips moved a trifle but no sound came.

She put her face beside his ear. "*Oh, my God, I am heartily sorry—*"

She waited, and there was a ghost of a whisper: "*—sorry—*"

"*—for having offended Thee, and I detest—*"

He nodded, his eyes sudden lucid. "*—all my sins—*"

She found his hand, cradled it. Tears blinded her, strangled her. It was a moment before she could go on. "*—because I dread the loss of Heaven—*"

She waited and then repeated: "*—the loss of Heaven—*"

There was no answer. Tommy's hand seemed cool in hers. And then Reves was lifting her away.

Farrel had been in the hospital a week when the nurse he liked best came in holding something behind her.

She was a big redhead, kind of pretty. She nodded to Farrel. "You had a visitor. She left something for you. Didn't give her name. Said you'd know who it was."

Farrel decided that it must have been Shelly Collins. The Collins girls had paid him more than one visit. They knew he'd shot their brother, too. On the steps, out there in the desert, Reves had fumbled his gun, started to drop it—something so uncharacteristic that Farrel still couldn't quite believe it. It had almost been as if Reves couldn't bring himself to kill that maniac. And Farrel, catching the gun, had had to do it.

All banged up, Farrel congratulated himself wryly, and I'm still a damned good catcher!

There didn't seem to be any hard feelings on the part of the Collins girls, though, just a lot of hopeful cheerfulness. Shelly Collins and Reves were having a big romance, that was obvious. More power to them, Farrel told himself. May their lives be long and happy, and may they have better sense than I did.

"I guess I know who left whatever you've got there," Farrel told the nurse.

"I'll open it, you with that bum wing of yours!"

Farrel heard the rustle of wrapping paper. Kidding her, he said, "It better be a bottle of bourbon."

"Huh! You and your thirst!" Still partially concealing the package behind her, she snipped away at the strings with her nurse's square-ended scissors. She tore off the paper. What seemed to be emerging was a picture, an oil painting, and Farrel grunted in astonishment. "Well, I'll be!" she said, holding it up and squinting at it. "A gen-u-wine oil as my mom would say, painted by a living artist!"

Farrel sat up and managed to grab it with his good hand. The frame was pitted mesquite, bleached silver and polished like steel. The painting showed the lonesome boxcar but there was no pup under it.

She had remembered what he'd said. This wasn't Artie Redbear's picture, this was new. Just for him.

Farrel decided that it must be a kind of thank-you note, her kind, her own special message for somebody who'd taken a bit of trouble over her hellion kids.

He nodded and handed the picture to the nurse.

"Hang it up where I can look at it," he said.

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